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**Exploring Dalit Participation in Learning and the  
Transformative Potential of Self Reflective Inquiry**

**By**

**Kemal Shaheen**

**Canterbury Christ Church University**

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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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## **Abstract**

*In this thesis I explore barriers to, and opportunities for, the participation in learning (and emancipation) of a profoundly subjugated segment of Indian Society referred to as Dalits. Accounting for approximately 16 per cent of the Indian population (according to the 2001 Census), Dalits have been excluded from education and wider society on the basis of their inferior position in the hierarchical division of society known as the Caste System.*

*A raft of statistics indicate the extent of this exclusion and the disproportionate representation of Dalit children in those who have never been enrolled in school, drop out before completing primary education, or are illiterate. However this thesis is not about numbers and I examine the relevant themes from a different perspective.*

*Drawing on evidence and insights garnered by employing a variety of research techniques (literature review, fieldwork in India, autobiographical episodes and self-reflective inquiry) I examine opportunities for Dalit participation in learning (not just formal schooling) that will stimulate this subjugated people to critically reflect upon the circumstances of their oppression and take action to challenge it. This thesis is, in part, an exploration of the contours of a liberating education.*

*At the heart of this thesis lies an examination of the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry. I argue that, if conducted sufficiently rigorously, the process of critical self-reflection can lead to a profound transformation in human consciousness and a radical shift in the relationship between Self and Other. I suggest that this insight is pivotal if we are to deepen our understanding of the barriers to, and opportunities for, Dalit emancipation and participation in learning.*

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Part One: Setting the Scene**

#### **Opening Thoughts**

Early on December 26<sup>th</sup> 2004 a tsunami triggered by an enormous earthquake in the Indian Ocean wiped out many thousands of lives and destroyed whole communities in India and other countries of South East Asia. Tamil Nadu, the state where I had been conducting my fieldwork months earlier, bore the brunt of the devastation in India. The fishing community that my interpreter and I used to walk through during evening strolls along the beach in Chennai was erased. Her parent's village in Southern Tamil Nadu was decimated. Perhaps triggered by the truly global impact of the crisis an enormous relief effort was mobilised: governments pledged millions in aid and public generosity was unprecedented. Yet despite the phenomenal levels of destruction and the subsequent outpouring of global grief and compassion an ancient form of discrimination based upon graded purity continued to operate. Widely known as the caste system, this hierarchical division of society is viewed by some orthodox Hindus (the majority religion of India) as having been divinely ordained and therefore immutable. Although, with the advent of independent India, discrimination on the basis of caste has been constitutionally prohibited under Article 15, the roots of the value system on which caste is premised grow far deeper and were so entrenched in certain psyches that the relief effort was hampered and they tempered the way that some people responded to the multiple tragedies and deaths.

A letter in *The Guardian* on Friday January 14<sup>th</sup> 2005 reads:

“One aspect of the tremendous Asian tsunami relief operation that has not received publicity is that of caste discrimination, to which India is particularly vulnerable. This affects communities of Dalits, the former “untouchables” [those who fall outside the caste system]. The National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights reports a reluctance on the part of authorities to register Dalit deaths; separation or even exclusion by caste in the relief camps; refusal to allow Dalits to receive relief; and the burial of the bodies of higher caste people in Dalit areas. Alongside this, higher castes refuse to deal with dead bodies and expect Dalits to do it. There have been reports that municipal cleaners from inland towns have been transported to deal with the bodies while locals watch. The Dalit workers are expected to work long hours, but are not given gloves, masks or other equipment, sleeping accommodation or food. It is profoundly to be hoped that all those aiding the tsunami victims will insist that caste discrimination plays no part in the relief efforts.”

### **The Caste System: from Untouchable to Dalit**

As Dirks (2001) points out ‘when thinking of India it is hard not to think of caste’ (p. 3), however, it is important to recognise that any researcher attempting to explore the caste system is confronted with numerous challenges and difficulties. It is a hugely complicated and heavily contested socio-religious phenomenon that has survived in different manifestations for at least three thousand years. As a researcher I am very conscious of the fact that my thesis will, at best, do no more than scratch the surface of this vast and intricate canvas. And yet despite these complexities (some of which I try to unpick in this thesis, others of which I will indubitably over-simplify), in one

sense the basic premise of the caste system is relatively straightforward. Not all human beings are born equal and therefore not all human beings are entitled to the same rights and freedoms. As the anthropologist Dumont points out in his seminal work *Homo Hierarchicus* (originally published 1966) this is an ideology that directly contradicts Enlightenment discourse about the value of human liberty and equality which grounds a very different ethical-legal framework. I believe that this thesis might make a contribution by engaging with the debate at this level.

Given the complexities involved I do not think that it is appropriate to provide a single, simple definition of ‘caste’ and I defer a more nuanced look at the caste system until later. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this introduction, it is illuminating to consider the following etymological point made by Dumont:

“ ‘Caste’ is of Portuguese and Spanish origin: ‘*casta*, properly something not mixed, from the Latin, *castus*, chaste’ (Littre’s Dictionary). The word seems to have been used by the Spaniards, and to have been applied to India by the Portuguese in the middle of the fifteenth century” (1980, p. 21)

Obviously the word ‘caste’ has emerged from a language foreign to the cultural context of the phenomenon that it is being used to describe in this instance and we must be cautious in translating it. However this observation gives a good insight into the way that Portuguese colonialists interpreted the system of stratification that they encountered in India – that they perceived separation and fragmentation (the quality of ‘not being mixed’) to be an integral feature.

The letter quoted above, written by the Trustees of the U.K. Dalit Solidarity Network, provides a chilling illustration of the extent to which ‘not mixing’ continues to govern both the thought and action of those who discriminate on the basis of caste. It points to the extreme degree of separation and exclusion experienced by a strata of society who, according to Hindu dogma, fall outside the parameters of the caste system and are thereby designated so inferior and impure as to render them ‘untouchable’. The important point here is that this notion of ‘untouchability’ is often interpreted literally and many orthodox practitioners hold that to be touched by ‘an untouchable’ is polluting and therefore higher castes should avoid mixing with lower castes where possible (marriage is one well known example). I find the term and notion of untouchability abhorrent and in this thesis use the word Dalit to refer to those people who have been subjugated by the caste system. I do so in solidarity with the Dalit activists who have adopted the word, meaning ‘broken’ or ‘crushed’ in the ancient Indian language Sanskrit, to refute their inferiorised status within the symbolic economy of caste. Elsewhere I discuss the historical shift in nomenclature as well as why it is held to be so important for Dalit emancipation.

## **Part Two: Exploring the Thesis: Focus and Structure**

### **The Objective of my Thesis**

On one level this thesis is an attempt to deepen my understanding of caste-based discrimination and exclusion. I take a more detailed look at caste as a system of social stratification which has perpetuated inequity and prevented Dalits from exercising, what many people today would take to be, basic human rights. Dalits have historically been tied into feudal patterns of dependence on, and obligation to, those above them. Excluded from certain occupations and educational opportunities they have frequently

been forced to subsist by performing menial jobs deemed too polluting for the higher castes such as disposing of corpses, scavenging or cleaning latrines. Hence the discrimination and abuse that occurred in the aftermath of the tsunami.

### ***Narrowing the focus: caste discrimination and educational exclusion***

Caste discrimination can operate at many levels in Indian society. As we shall see it potentially impacts upon the clothes that people wear, the places that they are permitted to worship, the food that they eat, the homes that they live in and the people that they can marry. To sharpen the focus of this thesis I have concentrated on one specific and deeply rooted aspect of caste-based exclusion – the historical restrictions that have been placed on Dalit participation in learning. I trace this educational exclusion back to a very early codification of caste doctrine known as *The Laws of Manu* (circa 200 BC) and explore how these restrictions have continued to operate (subject of course to changes over time and context) thereby preventing Dalits from equitably accessing learning opportunities for many hundreds of years. Arguably the educational exclusion of Dalits captures the very essence of caste discrimination because the transmission of sacred knowledge was restricted to, and controlled by, the highest priestly castes known as the Brahmins who served as the gatekeepers of learning and received wisdom.

### ***Deepening the focus: exploring consciousness and caste***

On another level this thesis is an attempt to deepen my understanding of caste consciousness – what it is in human consciousness that permits such profound discrepancies in the way that some human beings are valued over others. What is it in the way that we think that allows some people to be so severely ostracised from

society that they are rendered almost sub-human ('untouchable' by others)? I try to understand this because I shall argue that caste consciousness is not peculiar to Indian society or Hindu culture it has its roots in a certain way of perceiving ourselves, and the world in which we live, based upon fragmentation and separation. Here I address questions and themes that have been perennial philosophical and spiritual concerns transcending time and culture. If caste is a broad canvas, this second dimension of my PhD relates to an ocean of cosmic proportion. To talk about scratching the surface would be a misconception, there are only bigger or smaller ripples.

### ***Thinking about self reflection and transforming the self-world view***

As the letter from the UK Dalit Solidarity Network clearly reveals, a value and belief system based upon graded inequality has profound implications for all levels of human experience from more pragmatic socio-economic concerns to deeper spiritual questions about appropriate human relationship and the ways in which we value our own life and the lives of others. Whilst the caste system is a particularly pernicious example of exclusion based upon not mixing the 'pure' with the 'impure', I shall argue in this thesis that to understand exclusion properly we must reflect on how we think about self and other more carefully. This is why I believe that exploring human consciousness and existential notions of 'being in the world' is so important despite the enormous difficulties that such speculation clearly presents.

In this thesis I will not provide a strict definition of consciousness. There will be many scientific studies that are able to do this far more precisely than I can. Rather I draw on a range of spiritual, philosophical and psychoanalytic investigations, as well as my own self-reflective enquiry, to consider some of the epistemological,

ontological and existential concerns that arise when we explore human (inter) subjectivity. I shall look at a number of approaches, from various historical epochs and cultural contexts that have all sought to expand our understanding of what I shall later refer to as the self-world view.

I shall argue that Dalit emancipation requires a profound shift at the level of consciousness or in terms of the self-world view. Not only Dalits themselves but all those who subscribe to the beliefs and values that perpetuate caste discrimination must undergo this radical shift in consciousness. There are no short cuts or quick fix solutions for achieving this – only sustained self-reflective inquiry can lead to a sufficiently deep-seated transformation of consciousness and a more permanent shift in the self-world viewpoint. This is not simply a Dalit or a Hindu or even an Indian concern. How we think about ourselves in relation to others and the complex ecosystem which we all share is a human concern.

## **Developing the Research Themes**

The research themes developed by thinking about caste discrimination, barriers to Dalit participation in learning and opportunities for Dalit emancipation in relation to my ever-deepening interest in the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry. I focus on three connected themes:

### **Theme One: The Transformative Potential of Self-Reflective Inquiry**

### **Theme Two: Self-Reflective Inquiry and Dalit Emancipation**

### **Theme Three: Dalit Participation in Learning**

I refer to themes rather than specific research questions when discussing the way that I have approached my thesis because I feel that it is not only less restrictive but also captures the way that the thesis focus has evolved organically. When I began my research I was using the literature relating to self-reflective inquiry and the transformation of human consciousness as a useful point of departure for thinking about the more substantive themes of the thesis. Towards the end of my study self-reflective inquiry had become a distinctive theme in its own right.

#### ***Exploring the research themes***

I have used a three-tiered strategy for exploring the research themes and structuring this thesis. Firstly, I have engaged with other people's ideas and writing. This is a conventional approach to doctoral research and absolutely crucial. In the following chapters I will justify the theories and thinking that I have explored, explain why I believe that they are relevant to my research focus and how and what they contribute to deepening an understanding of the three research themes.

Secondly, I have used my own self-reflective inquiry and autobiographical analysis to think about the research themes. This method is being used more frequently in qualitative research given the criticisms that are often levelled at positivistic attempts to separate the researcher so comprehensively from what is studied (the research). By locating ourselves in relation to our research project we are able to yield interesting insights by making some of the values, beliefs and prejudices that we hold more explicit. I also foreground my own self-reflective inquiry given the central



importance that I attach to such reflection in the transformation of human consciousness.

The third tier of my strategy involves the use of case study. I began my research thinking that the empirical component would be the primary focus of the thesis. As I explain in the next chapter, I had originally conceived of my research as an exploration of educational exclusion in India that was to engage with a particular discourse about marginalised learners characterised by some as ‘special needs education’. Not long into my research I felt uncomfortable with this discourse and became far more interested in wider issues of educational disadvantage in India. This explains my interest in caste discrimination. However the first extended period of fieldwork that I conducted with a view to defining my case study (five months with the Spastics Society of India in Mumbai), for a variety of reasons, did not work out as I had hoped. Firstly, my research focus was moving away from a more limited notion of educational exclusion and secondly, I found myself doing more work for the Spastics Society itself and spending less time trying to define a case study.

The second period of fieldwork proved more useful in terms of focussing the case. I returned to India to spend more time with a small organisation based in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu called Social Action Movement (SAM). SAM is a radical non-governmental organisation that works to empower Dalit and other vulnerable and marginalised communities. I had been introduced to them very briefly during a three week trip to Chennai (formerly Madras) the state capital of Tamil Nadu to visit one of their partners, Vidya Sagar, a sister organisation to the Spastic Society.

The time that I spent with SAM certainly did help me to think more deeply about caste discrimination however I became more interested in the ideas and values that drove the organisation and informed the thinking of the key decision makers. As such the empirical component of this research became less focussed on developing a clear and detailed case study of SAM and more a study of the organisations ethos and philosophy. In the final stages of writing up my thesis I decided to cut one of the case study chapters because I realised that it had become increasingly superfluous to the overall aim of the thesis – to explore the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry with a view to better understanding Dalit emancipation and participation in learning.

## **Outlining the Thesis**

Certain chapters in this thesis address all three of the research themes, whilst others concentrate on one particular theme. However one crucial question was constantly in my mind whilst I was reflecting on the literature, engaging in autobiographical analysis or exploring the empirical data and this is evident in the way that I have written my chapters and structured the thesis. What is it about the inward journey that transforms and liberates and how can I build on these insights to think about Dalit emancipation and caste discrimination?

### ***The structure of the thesis***

Chapter Two expands upon the methodology that I have used to explore my research themes. It opens with some initial thoughts about epistemology and ontology because to explain the methods that I have used requires me to make explicit some of the assumptions that I hold about what is knowable (ontology) and how we can know

what we know (epistemology). I go into this in considerable detail and contrast two distinct ontological perspectives (Cartesian Dualism and Vedic Monism) not only to explain my own position but also to examine the type of ontological position that has given rise to certain Indian philosophies. Known as Vedic thought (from Veda meaning ‘knowledge’ in Sanskrit) these systems have been closely associated with the caste system. I then go on to look more closely at some of the methods that I have used including literature review, self-reflective inquiry and case study.

In Chapter Three I am primarily concerned with outlining a conceptual framework and since ‘self-reflection and the transformation of consciousness’ is the fulcrum of this thesis, the chapter is weighted accordingly. I address the two other research themes – Dalit emancipation and participation in learning but this is done ‘through the lens’, so to speak, of the first theme. For example, the literature that I use to reflect on Dalit participation in learning here has more to do with thinking about the type of education that might facilitate Dalit emancipation and is less concerned with the socio-historical exclusion of Dalit children from education. I address these more substantive themes in Chapters Five and Seven. I feel that this approach enabled me to link the themes in a way that I would not have been able to do had I used this chapter, more conventionally, to explore the history of the Dalit emancipation movement or legislative attempts to improve Dalit access to schooling.

Chapters Four and Five also address all three of the research themes but in very different ways. In Chapter Four I reflect upon certain autobiographical episodes that can be broadly related to the three substantive themes of this thesis. These include

some of my own experiences in various learning environments as well as incidents in India and England that helped me to extend my thinking on self and participation.

Crucially, Chapter Four has helped me to conceive of my PhD as a journey that has enabled me to deepen my self-understanding and explore a fragmented and ambiguous sense of self. I have a mixed heritage. My father was born in India but then moved to Pakistan during the partition of the country in 1947. He moved to England when he was in his twenties and married my mother who is English. As I explain in the chapter I was born in the UK and have spent most of my life in a small, rural and largely ethnically homogeneous part of the country. Growing up I had very little awareness of what I perceived to be the Asian dimension of my heritage and one of the many reasons for deciding to locate my fieldwork in India was to explore this ‘part of me’ more fully. Chapter Four specifically and, in a sense, the thesis more generally tells this story of self-discovery. It helped me to realise that the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry should become a central research theme and not just a methodological tool.

Chapter Five is an attempt to put a seemingly infinite range of issues connected with the three themes in socio-historical context as well as providing a background for my exploration of the Social Action Movement ethos. Caste and education in India, perhaps the two most important substantive issues that I am addressing in this thesis, have a long and convoluted history and it was very difficult trying to write this chapter, particularly because that history is differently interpreted by the victors and the vanquished. Nevertheless I used the three research themes to structure the chapter. I looked at the way that the symbols and architecture of caste might have had a

constraining influence on Dalit consciousness and inhibited self-reflective inquiry. I also looked at the way that the Dalit emancipation movement has rejected those symbols in an attempt to transform and liberate Dalit consciousness. I then focused on Dalit participation in learning and considered the historical exclusion of Dalits from education (because of caste-assumptions) as well as some of the consequences of independence and colonialism for caste, education and Dalit emancipation.

Chapters Six and Seven relate to my engagement with Social Action Movement. Chapter Six begins with a general overview of SAM as an organisation and explains what I refer to as their *modus operandi* - a fundamental concern with encouraging Dalits to reject caste consciousness. It then goes on to explore research themes one and two by considering the ways in which SAM attempt to transform Dalit consciousness by stimulating self-reflective inquiry. Chapter Seven looks at research theme three (Dalit participation in learning). I not only consider the policy context and the various legislative attempts to facilitate Dalit education but also the specific projects which SAM has set up to improve access to schools as well as develop learning environments that encourage Dalit children to critically reflect (and act) upon the circumstances of their oppression.

Chapter Eight concludes the thesis by drawing together the three research themes and making some suggestions for ways in which my research could have been improved and what I would do differently if I was to conduct further research into this subject.

## Opening Thoughts (Concluded)

When I was twenty, I had an experience that changed the way that I looked at the world and the way that I conceived my place in it. Lying in bed, bitterly depressed after the break down of my first serious relationship, I was absorbed in a self-reflective quagmire that Bunyan might well have labelled a ‘slough of despond’. I was mentally and emotionally convinced that I neither would, nor could, ever love again. And then, in a flash, I experienced a sudden burst of joy and an intense feeling that I was intimately connected to something far more expansive than the limited sense of self which I had hitherto taken as the locus of my consciousness. For the last twelve years I have been trying to make sense of this experience and, indubitably, the words that I use to describe it now are the product of that journey and not necessarily how I would have articulated it then. I do not doubt that there is a very rational neuro-physiological explanation relating to the way that the brain *can* work and consciousness *can* function when an individual is so self-absorbed (and this, I believe, is why prayer and meditation occupy such a central place in religion). Whatever the cause, it has led me to engage with a variety of ideas and literatures that explore, in different ways, *the role of self-reflection in the transformation of consciousness*. I knew that if I was to sustain an interest in my PhD I would have to bring these ideas to the substantive focus of the thesis.

## **Chapter Two: Knowledge, Freedom and Participation –**

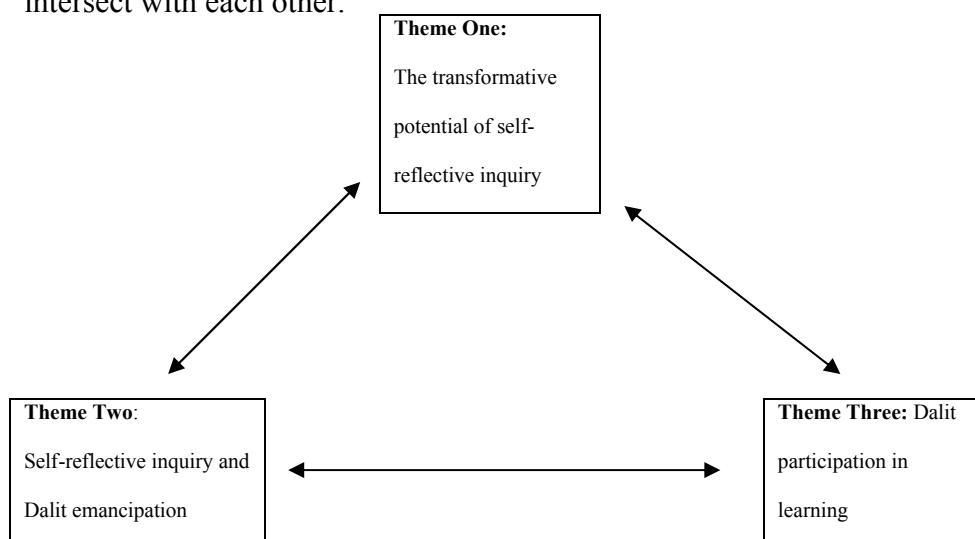
### **Towards a Liberating Methodology**

*“...you do not attain to knowledge by remaining on the shore and watching the foaming waves, you must make the venture and cast yourself in, you must swim, alert and with all your force, even if a moment comes when you think you are loosing consciousness: in this way, and in no other, do you reach anthropological insight.”*

*(Buber, 2002, p. 148)*

In this chapter I explore the ‘swim’ that I have embarked upon. To extend Buber’s metaphor, I not only discuss the particular strokes that have propelled me (the research methods that I have employed) but also the ways in which I have thought about the nature and purpose of ‘swimming’ in general (my epistemological and ontological assumptions) prior to taking the plunge.

The first part of this chapter grounds the thesis by looking at the three research themes that structure it and then exploring certain epistemological, ontological and theoretical ideas that help to make sense of them. I conceive of the themes in terms of a pyramid and have tried to develop them in tandem by teasing out some of the ways that they intersect with each other.



I then draw on Cartesian dualism and Vedic non-dualism (Advaita) to explore two diametrically opposed approaches to understanding and knowing the subject domain (ourselves) and the object domain (the external world of others). I argue that both potentially contribute valuable insights to an exploration of caste discrimination and Dalit emancipation. Cartesian dualism can help us to understand the value of autonomy and self-determination so important for Dalit liberation whilst Vedic non-dualism can help us to think about the importance of transcending narrow self-centred modes of consciousness. However, I argue that both positions have quite severe shortcomings if we wish to deepen our understanding of participation. For this an epistemological synthesis is helpful, one that re-configures the relationship between subject and object. Here I touch upon the ideas of scientist and philosopher David Bohm whose work I use elsewhere in this thesis.

These epistemological and ontological reflections not only help me to explain my choice of a qualitative research methodology but also develop my thinking on certain key themes in this thesis including transforming the self-world relationship and the value of human liberty. Developing these themes further I discuss how my work can be linked to a Critical Theory perspective. The central importance attached to autonomy and self-determination in Critical Theory coheres with the way that I have interpreted Dalit emancipation.

In the second part of this chapter I explain the particular methods I have used to collect my data. I discuss my three-pronged approach to exploring the substantive research themes – the strategies that I have adopted for engaging with the literature, my use of critical self-reflection and autobiography and my engagements in India that



form the empirical component of this thesis (with a focus on the Dalit organisation Social Action Movement). I also discuss some of the tools that I used to collect data in India including interview, classroom observation, documentary analysis, use of video footage, writing a research journal). These methods certainly yielded interesting data however research requires more than this and is subject to scrutiny by others with reference to notions of validity, reliability and truth (Schostak, 2002). I therefore outline the various ways in which I have attempted to enhance the validity and reliability of my PhD. Crucially this has meant viewing my interpretive voice as a limited and partial contribution to an ongoing dialogue with others, rather than an authoritative witness to incontrovertible truths.

## **Part One: Grounding the Thesis**

### **Synthesising the Research Themes**

In Chapter One I explained that the research themes developed as a result of my ongoing attempts to explore the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry. At first, I used my reading and thinking around this issue as a framework within which I could tease out some interesting points relating to Dalit emancipation and participation in learning. Exploring some of the ideas that grew out of the literature and actions of the Dalit emancipation movement I began to see the attempts to re-construct Dalit self-hood and reject an oppressive caste-consciousness as analogous to the sense of liberation which occurs when ego-consciousness is transcended. I will be more explicit about what is meant by the liberation from, or transcendence of, ego-consciousness when I return to this theme below and in Chapter Three. For the present purposes I wish to note here the profound importance that many religious

thinkers have attached to extending our understanding of what we mean by ‘self’ and reflecting upon the potentially detrimental impact of an excessively narrow and fragmented self-consciousness that separates the individual (ego) from ‘the transcendent’. William James, in his classic study of religious experience (originally published 1902) embeds this self-reflective quest at the heart of his definition of religion:

“Religion [...] shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual [human beings] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*”

(1985, p.31)

Whilst conducting my fieldwork with Social Action Movement I felt that there were some interesting links that could be made between the attempts to transform human consciousness that have guided religious thought in this way and SAM’s approach to informal learning projects and education that encouraged the rejection of caste consciousness through critical self-reflection.

After I had written an initial un-structured draft both my supervisor and I felt that I should make my own self-reflective journey more explicit. My first attempts at an autobiographical chapter to discuss some of the ideas, beliefs and values that I brought to the research project, had already developed into an ongoing reflective piece exploring my sense of ‘self’ as I travelled between England (the country where my Mother was born, and I grew up) and India (the country where my father was born, and I was conducting my fieldwork). By introducing Theme One I was able to be more explicit about this research interest and draw upon, in a more systematic way,

many of the books and ideas that I had reflected upon prior to, and during, work on my PhD.

### **Some Reflections on Epistemology and Ontology**

It is not uncommon to begin one's methodological investigations by making a case for choosing either qualitative or quantitative research, or for justifying a mixture of research techniques from both paradigms. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) make a standard distinction between the two approaches:

“Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Proponents of such studies claim that their work is done from a value-free framework.” (p. 9)

The particular paradigm one adopts depends upon how one characterises a) the nature of human being in the world that is being studied – the relationship between subject and object, and b) how one attains to knowledge of this world (both subject and object). Crucially the argument turns on whether one can adopt a value neutral approach to studying the world.

#### ***Cartesian Dualism:***

Descartes firmly believed we could and that it was incumbent upon us to try. His attempts to do so have had an enduring and profound influence on the development of

scientific practice and social theory. One of the most significant for the development of this thesis is the role that his ideas played in shaping the Enlightenment conviction that autonomy and self-determination (liberty) are crucial for human well being. Descartes believed that freedom is axiomatic given our capacity to doubt (see below). However, I believe that this epistemological position, carried to a logical conclusion, is alienating and can have a detrimental impact upon the way that we relate to other human beings, primarily because it posits a self that exists independently of the world and independently of other selves. I go into these issues in some depth because they have enormous implications for the way in which I have thought about Dalit emancipation.

Cartesian epistemology identifies a finite self or ego that is separate from the world or ‘any material thing’ and it is the Cartesian ego which is taken as the starting point from which knowledge of the world is accumulated. Descartes therefore believed that the world which was to be known (object domain) was separate from the knower (subject) and that truth (knowledge of the object domain) arises by first doubting all that we have previously held to be true and then assiduously building upon the only real point of certainty that we have – self-consciousness that we exist as a thinking creature – *cogito ergo sum*. In *Discourse on Method* (originally published 1637), Descartes writes:

“I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, *nor is dependent on any material thing*; so that “I,” that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body, and is even more easily known than the latter...” (1912, p. 27 my italics)

The radical separation between thinking ‘I’ and the material world (including one’s own body) can lead to privileging the autonomous self to such an extent that it is seen as the only secure basis for human understanding.

Descartes himself did believe in a more significant category than self (namely God) but he believed that we attained to knowledge of God through knowledge of ourselves (a proposition that is not incompatible with the non-dualist Vedic philosophy that I explore below). Therefore he took the starting point of human certainty, the first principle of philosophy, as the autonomous thinking self and this has had profound implications not only for the development of the natural sciences but also a particular way of relating to, and knowing, the world of others. Descartes scientific method began with the intuitively apprehended certainty of the finite self and then inferred and deduced other truths from this starting point. It is not difficult to see how this privileging of the autonomous self could also lead to the kind of ethical reflection that we see in Mill’s *On Liberty* (1857) that ascribes utmost importance to freedom for, and the self-determination of, the separate human unit (within the limits of the rights of others, of course). Below I touch upon some theories that have developed these themes in a way that might extend our thinking on Dalit emancipation. First however I consider an epistemological position that stands in stark contrast to Cartesian dualism.

### ***Vedic epistemology – non-dualism and the transcendence of ego-consciousness***

In sharp contrast the Vedic philosophers adopted a monistic system in which the ‘ultimate category’ or first ontological principle, prior in order of being to the finite

self, was the universal divinity (Brahma/God). Although Descartes did believe in God it was not his 'first principle' rather, he proceeds to establish the existence of God from his intuition that the only thing he knows with any degree of certainty is the existence of his thinking, finite self. In his classic work on Indian philosophy Radhakrishnan (originally published 1923) notes that the Vedic seers sought a radically different first principle, or basis for certainty:

“Self-consciousness is not the ultimate category of the universe. There is something transcending the consciousness of self, to which many names are given – Intuition, Revelation, Cosmic Consciousness, and God-vision. We cannot describe it adequately so we call it super-consciousness. ”

(1999, p. 25)

All the Vedic philosophical systems hold that the individual is indivisible from the whole, a mystical insight which leads to the interesting epistemological conviction that the human being is caught in an illusion (or false relationship with the world) if self-consciousness is viewed as the ultimate category of perception. 'Reality' is determined by our level of consciousness and therefore liberation from the bondage of ignorance (or apprehending the 'truth') requires a shift in consciousness or, more specifically, a transcendence of egocentric consciousness:

“As the difference between mere consciousness and self-consciousness constitutes the wide gulf separating the animal from [human being], so the difference between self-consciousness and super-consciousness constitutes all the difference between [humans as they are and humans as they ought to be]

(1999, p. 25)

Self-consciousness, according to Vedic wisdom, traps one in what is referred to as Maya (illusion) – we attain to correct knowledge of the world (truth) by Moksa (release) or liberation from the atomistic view of self-hood. One very important twentieth century Indian scholar, poet and philosopher, Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), based his thought on the teachings of the ancient sages which stemmed from the insight that:

“...behind the appearances of the universe there is the Reality of a Being and Consciousness, a Self of all things, one and eternal. All beings are united in that One Self and Spirit but divided by a certain separativity of consciousness, an ignorance of their true Self and Reality in the mind, life and body.”

(1999, p. 177)

Aurobindo goes on to state:

“It is possible by a certain psychological discipline to remove this veil of separative consciousness and become aware of the true Self, the Divinity within us all.”

(Ibid.)

It is this notion of liberation from bondage as a removal of the ‘veil of separative consciousness’ that will become central to the argument that I am making in this thesis. Of course some might argue that it is imprudent to borrow epistemological insights from philosophical systems that are so closely associated with the development of caste consciousness. In Chapters Five and Eight I explore ideas and offer suggestions as to why, on the contrary, caste-discrimination is a betrayal of the spirit of Advaitic (non-dualistic) thinking.

### ***Towards an epistemological synthesis***

So far I have argued that Vedic and Cartesian ontological and epistemological beliefs are diametrically opposed in their conceptualisation of the way that human beings relate to and therefore establish knowledge of the world. Self-consciousness for Descartes was the founding principle on which knowledge is to be built, for the Vedic philosophers, however, self-consciousness is to be transcended if human beings are to escape the bondage of ignorance. I believe that taken to their logical conclusions both disrupt authentic human being because they adopt a partial view of subjectivity or self-consciousness. Subjectivity is neither wholly transcendent nor wholly immanent rather, as thinkers like David Bohm and Martin Buber (who I return to later) articulate, it arises as a result of the dialectic relationship between the immanent Self and the transcendent Other. On this account Vedic epistemology would be viewed as obscuring individual autonomy by privileging the transcendent whole (and seeing all else as Maya or illusion) and therefore alienates the self by failing to recognise its legitimate and distinctive existence. In Cartesian epistemology it is the individual self that is privileged as the cardinal point of certainty in human understanding of the world and therefore the self is alienated because it is divorced from the world (seen as transcendent Other) in which it exists.

In this thesis I propose a different view of subjectivity and therefore hold a different perspective on how one attains to knowledge of the world. David Bohm (originally published 1996) uses the concept of *participation* to explain the relationship between part (subject) and whole (object); crucially he sees freedom as a necessary condition:

“Currently that word has changed its meaning. It has two meanings now. One is “to partake of.” We partake of the whole within ourselves. Another is “to



take part in it actively.” Both are necessary. So this contrasts with the current atomistic view of society in which every person is an atom which just interacts externally. [She] does not partake of the whole. [She] is interacting only to get something for [herself]. The general view that I have is that participation is fundamental.” (2004, p. 136)

The important point for the development of my methodology is that the atomistic and mechanistic view of society, which is very much a legacy of Cartesian Dualism is rejected. But so too is the kind of transcendent holism that might be associated with Vedic epistemology – the whole is not ‘imposed’ in a manner which denigrates individual autonomy, rather the ‘whole is *in* each part and each part is in the whole’ (Ibid)

But what does it mean that the whole is not imposed? The key to understanding this proposition is to consider how Bohm views the cosmos. Based upon his scientific work in the field of quantum mechanics which very crudely put, posits that the observer fundamentally affects the nature of what is observed – that the observed does not exist independently of the observer, Bohm develops the philosophical notion of an *Implicate Order* and distinguishes it from what he refers to as an *Explicate Order*. These orders are two levels of reality which seem to correspond to the two different ways of looking at the world represented by Descartes and the Vedic philosophers. He states:

“...if you look at the mathematics of the quantum theory it describes a movement [...] of waves that unfold and enfold throughout the whole of space. You could therefore say that everything is enfolded in this whole, or

even in each part, and that it then unfolds. I call this an implicate order, the enfolded order, and this unfolds into an explicate order. [...] In the implicate order everything is thus internally related to everything, everything contains everything, and only in the explicate order are things separated and relatively independent.” (2004, p. 129)

Such a view has enormous implications for the way that Bohm views human relationship. He argues that it is important for human beings to recognise their participation in the whole however it is important that they should relate in such a way that individuality is not sacrificed in relationship but enhanced through participation. The ‘I’ is neither separate from the cosmos (atomistic Cartesian legacy) nor subsumed by it (Vedic legacy) rather there exists a relationship of mutual participation. He states:

“I would like to see [hu]mankind establish itself as one whole, with freedom for each of the parts, but with mutual participation; to come into a coherent whole, which would be creative.” (2004, p. 137)

I have embedded this sentiment at the heart of my thesis and explore it in more depth in the following chapters.

## **Why Qualitative Research?**

These epistemological reflections substantiate my decision to engage in qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000) generic definition of qualitative research reveals that many of the epistemological assumptions that I highlight above are

recognised as interesting opportunities for the qualitative researcher to engage with rather than difficulties which need to be surmounted:

“Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.” (p. 3)

In my exploration of Dalit emancipation through self-reflective inquiry and participation in learning I follow this approach. Given my epistemological belief that the subject is deeply implicated in the object domain I regard it as crucial to locate the observer/researcher in the world. What I observe during the course of my research and how I have attempted to ‘make the world visible’ has been significantly conditioned by my own subjectivity and sense of self. My beliefs, values, sensibilities, desires have all impacted upon what I have seen and how I have chosen to interpret these observations. The interpretations that I make in this thesis are not exclusively the result of my private speculations but arise from my interaction with significant others. Their ideas, values, beliefs and sensibilities (the meanings which they bring to life) have impacted upon the way that I have thought about the thematic concerns of this thesis. Therefore interpretation for me is an intersubjective and interactional phenomenon and this is a pivotal tenet of my epistemological beliefs – we understand

and also construct the world only through mutual participation with others. As Bohm argues:

“The implicate order implies mutual participation of everything with everything. No thing is complete in itself, and its full being is realised only in participation.” (2004, p. 130)

## **A Critical Theory Framework**

If knowledge requires recognition of the inherent connectedness of subject and object and this realisation is tantamount to liberation from the narrow confines of egotism then it is essential that human beings be provided the space for adequate self-determination. External domination (telling people what to learn, forcing people into particular practices and conventions, moulding human beings according to the desires and beliefs of something that has not arisen from within) is anathema to the idea of self-determination and also inadequate for the accumulation of knowledge because the ideas, beliefs, desires and convictions of the Other are disregarded.

In exploring Dalit emancipation and participation in learning I draw on the theoretical insights of Critical Theory. Critical Theory is not a unified school of thought (Gibson, 1986, Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000) and it is probably more appropriate to talk about Critical *Theories* as one would distinguish between *feminisms*. However, all of the thinkers who have been broadly identified with critical theory share a passionate contempt for systems which prevent the individual from exercising any reasonable degree of control over their own life.

In my research I am seeking to understand the subjugation of Dalits – something which occurs because of their inferior position in the hegemonic caste system. Privilege and prestige are intimately connected with one’s position within the caste hierarchy and these, along with related notions such as disadvantage and iniquity, are primary concerns for the critical theorist:

“...critical theory analyses competing power interests between groups and individuals within a society – identifying who gains and who loses in specific situations. Privileged groups, criticalists argue, often have an interest in supporting the status quo to protect their advantages; the dynamics of such efforts often become a central focus of critical research.”

(Kincheloe and McLaren, 2001, p. 281)

As such critical theory aims at the emancipation of those groups and individuals who have been disadvantaged because they lack the power to control their own lives. It therefore seeks not only to explain the forces that ‘prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decisions that crucially affect their lives’ but also to challenge these forces and, by doing so, encourage ‘greater degrees of autonomy and human agency’. (ibid. p. 282).

### **Some Ethical Reflections**

Drawing inspiration from Critical Theory (and liberal thinkers like J.S. Mill) I believe that freedom is profoundly important for human beings and this belief is integral to the sense that I have made of the books that I read and the data that I collected. I tried to ensure that I respected the freedom of those who helped me in my research in a number of ways (by always asking permission to either interview or observe; by

ensuring anonymity in oral and written presentations of my work and trying to be honest and transparent about my research purposes). I also tried to value the people who assisted me in my research. I was conscious that I needed to reciprocate the time and effort that many people invested in me and I always offered to assist any organisation in their work (sometimes at the expense of my own research). I did not always meet the high ethical standards that I believe it is important to strive for in research (for example seeking permission means the permission of all people involved and it is debateable whether the children that I observed really gave their informed consent when I asked teachers whether I could film or observe). Whilst I tried to be unobtrusive I was very aware of how disturbing my presence could be (particularly in overcrowded classrooms with high pupil-teacher ratios) and the impact that using relatively expensive technology in very poor environments can have. I highlight these issues here and elsewhere in the thesis because if I were to conduct research again I would want to minimise such disruptions.

In a sense my whole thesis relates to ethics and therefore I will not extend this discussion here. The main point that I wish to make is that I have sought to deepen my ethical reflection by engaging with ideas and philosophies that emphasise the value of transcending egocentric consciousness. As such I believe that we can and should extend our thinking beyond privileging human liberty and autonomy – and this calls for a fundamental shift in the self-world viewpoint. This ethical position has informed my research at every step.

## **Part Two: Exploring the Substantive Themes of the Thesis**

### **A: Exploring the Themes by Engaging with Literature**

In this section I trace the development of my reading strategy, the primary foci of this reading and the limits that were placed on a vast set of potential sources. Reading serves a variety of inter-related purposes in the research process. One reads to formulate understandings of topics one knows nothing about; to strengthen and/or critique existing knowledge about a subject. Reading helps to identify new themes, new areas of interest or novel ways of approaching old issues. By exploring literature that is not obviously or directly related to the research focus one can think about the issues in creative and imaginative ways. Reading helps to determine the themes we choose to focus on prior to fieldwork and the analytical sense we make of our research findings. It is therefore an integral aspect of data collection and cannot be divorced from the empirical component of research. At different points of my research journey I have read for a variety of different reasons.

Deciding when to engage with the substantive literature is an important part of the reading strategy. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) point out that although there is ‘some debate about when someone doing a qualitative study should begin a review of the literature’ (p. 163) it is generally a good idea to ‘have been in the field for a while’ before going through the substantive literature. Intuitively I feel that this is sound advice if one is an experienced researcher – it affords one a greater openness to

emergent issues and limits the pre-conceptions one brings to the field. In short creative acts of perception are less likely if one is seeing through a set of ideas garnered by reading the work of other theorists in the field. However I felt that, as a novice researcher with only very partial understanding of the issues that I intended to research at the outset, it was sensible to acquaint myself with some of the pertinent issues before embarking upon my first period of fieldwork.

### ***From Special Educational Needs to Inclusion***

With my first research proposal I set out to explore the barriers to participation in learning experienced by children categorised as having special educational needs in India. I therefore wanted to understand something of the history and relevant themes concerning the development and provision of what became known as ‘special education’ in the UK. At the same time I also engaged in a period of voluntary work as Learning Support Assistant (LSA) with a school close to where I lived (see below). Books such as Beveridge’s *Special Educational Needs in Schools* (1999) or Sally Tomlinson’s *A Sociology of Special Education* (1982) provided me with the historical overview and insight into the general thematic issues that I was looking for. This reading enabled me to get a sense of some of the significant controversies in the field. One issue that struck me as particularly significant was the attempt to re-conceptualise special education by moving away from a psycho-medical (or deficit) model whereby the child’s educational failure is attributed to an innate deficiency, weakness or disability. A significant body of practitioners and theorists were critiquing this paradigm and arguing for a ‘social model’ of special education. The social model draws attention to the socio-cultural framework within which ideas of disability and special educational need are embedded – a social constructionist approach that



identifies social barriers as the main obstacle to participation in learning (Corbett 1998, Clough 1998, Clark et. al 1998). From such reading emerged a second related theme. A narrow focus on special educational needs in terms of cognitive or emotional deficit was altogether too restrictive for understanding the multi-faceted barriers to, and opportunities for, participation in learning that confront all children, to a lesser or greater degree. Therefore some theorists argued that an inclusive approach to education (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Sebba and Ainscow, 1996; Hart, 1996) was not simply about ‘mainstreaming’ children diagnosed as educationally subnormal or deviant in behaviour, rather it requires:

“...a detailed examination of how barriers to learning and participation can be reduced for any student.” (Booth and Ainscow, 2002, p. 1)

As a result of this foray into the literature I entered the field believing that I should be open to finding and examining multiple barriers to participation in learning and not restrict my research by exclusively focussing on issues connected with a discourse traditionally labelled ‘special needs education’. I believe that there is an analogy here with the move away from discourse about ‘Untouchables’ – to the notion that Dalits have been oppressed by the caste system. In both instances the debate is broadened (consciousness is transformed) so that disadvantage is seen as the result of a particular way of viewing the world rather than an innate quality of the marginalised themselves.

### ***Deepening the frame of reference***

As noted previously, from the inception of my research I was keen to explore the issues with reference to my spiritual reading and reflection. I read literature that

enabled me to think about the role and purpose of education in human development and the impact that education might have on spiritual and moral progress. I engaged with many classic religious texts from a variety of different traditions and looked at writing by spiritually oriented thinkers many of whom explicitly addressed the nature and purpose of education. I also read other ‘more radical’ approaches to education and learning (for example Freire 1996, 1998, Illich 1971 and Holt 1972). Ongoing engagement with literature of this kind enabled me to contextualise themes emerging from the substantive literature by placing them within a deeper spiritual and ethical frame of reference. Indeed many of the issues that emerged from such reading *became* the substantive focus of my research.

Since I was not familiar with the country in which I had elected to do my fieldwork I also did some general reading about India. I read works of fiction set in India (Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997), Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995)) and autobiographical accounts of travelling and living in India (Naipaul’s acerbic *An Area of Darkness* (1964) and his more affectionate look at the country entitled *India, A Million Mutinies Now* (1998)). I read Cameron’s *An Indian Summer* (1987) – an account of his experiences as a journalist in India and tried to read a little about the cultural, political and economic history of India (Corbridge, 2000; Das, 2002; Keay, 2000). Such reading could only provide me with the most rudimentary flavour of a country that is so culturally rich and linguistically, ethnically and geographically diverse. Nevertheless it certainly helped me to reflect more thoughtfully about events and behaviours, beliefs, customs and practices which I encountered in India.

### ***Reading to explore self-consciousness***

My first two trips to India proved to be periods of intense critical self-reflection as I attempted to negotiate my own sense of self and the ramifications that this had for my feelings of belonging and participation in a variety of different contexts. During these field visits and upon return from the field I read a number of texts addressing the issue of self-hood and self-consciousness. Many of the spiritual texts which I was continually engaging with were useful precisely because they charted the spiritual journey as a turning in upon oneself – intense critical self-reflection which ultimately results in liberation from the narrow confines of self (God consciousness or Enlightenment).

I also explored the ‘self’ from other angles. I read a number of works by Jung, which gave me a psychoanalytic perspective, and two books by the psychologist and philosopher William James. From this reading I became interested in the link between critical self-reflection and inter-subjective relationship. Jung’s exploration of the ‘shadow self’ and James’ notion of the ‘divided self’ hinted at the need to ‘go outside’ the self for the purposes of psychic development and integration. This process had obvious resonance with the spiritual goal of self-transcendence and I became interested in exploring inter-subjectivity. I read and re-read Buber’s seminal work *I and Thou* (1923) amongst other works of his and various books by the Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh including *Interbeing* (1997). Both philosophies, in very different ways, emphasised the profound significance of inter-subjective relationship, communication and dialogue in the quest for self-transcendence. This linking of liberation with patterns of human relationship became important when I was thinking about barriers to, and opportunities for, participation (whether in learning or other

contexts). Other books applying the scientific insights of Quantum Theory to more generalised philosophies (Zohar, 1990; Bohm, 2004) allowed me to think in interesting ways about inter-subjectivity and relationship and also proved useful when considering my approach to methodology and epistemology.

### ***Reading to explore Education For All***

Before establishing the precise focus of my case study with SAM I was reading in a more general way about Education For All in India. The Public Report On Basic Education (1999) and the India Education Report (2002) proved very useful here. I also explored the India specific components of international recommendations on Education For All (e.g. Dakar Framework for Action, 2000). I was also able to download various policy statements and constitutional commitments on education in India from government websites and this helped to define the policy context. All of these provided me with a basic overview of how education was delivered in India and the multiple barriers to, and opportunities for, participation in learning that existed in the country.

### ***Reading to explore Caste and Dalit emancipation***

Once I had narrowed the research focus I began to read more specifically about the caste system and its religious, social and cultural significance. I looked at indigenous sociological accounts of the phenomenon (e.g. Srinivas, 1952 and 1996; Bhardwaj, 2002) as well as work by foreign anthropologists (e.g. Dumont, 1980; Moffatt, 1979; Mosse, 1999, Beteille, 1965). I thought it was important to understand the philosophies that are used to support the caste system and I returned to Indian texts such as the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita as well as Manu Smrti, accredited with

writing one of earliest codifications of the caste system and identified as public enemy number one by many voices from the Dalit liberation movement.

I looked at books and articles focussing on Dalit education (e.g. Mishra, 2001; Kaul 1993) and paid particular attention to those texts exploring the transformation of Dalit consciousness (e.g. Shah, 2001; Omvedt, 2001; Anandhi, 1995). From this reading I developed a deeper interest in writing by authors seeking to understand the dimensions of a critical Dalit consciousness (e.g. Ambedkar, 1987, Rajeshakar, 2002; Joshi, 1986; Rao, 1995; Aloysius, 1998) and included a body of work referred to as Dalit literature (autobiography, fiction and poetry by authors like Valmiki, 2003; Jadhav, 2003; Dangle, 1992).

No matter how extensively I read, as an ‘outsider’, I could only hope to scratch the surface of caste as a system of beliefs, practices and values which I was not born into or intimately acquainted with. Nevertheless, through my engagement with the literature, and particularly my focus on writing from the Dalit liberation movement I began to get a sense of the profound importance attached to critical self reflection in the transformation of Dalit consciousness. I therefore linked my reading here with earlier spiritual insights into liberation from egocentric consciousness.

### ***Reading to deepen my understanding of freedom***

When I returned from my final period of fieldwork with SAM I re-read Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (originally published 1970) and had an epiphany. It struck me that the issue of freedom linked many of the key themes. Self-transcendence was about liberation from the narrow confines of egotism. Dalit emancipation and

reducing the barriers to participation in learning requires freedom from the oppressive caste system. Education and learning that inhibits autonomous and critical thought impedes self-determination. I therefore set about deepening my understanding of freedom and liberty. Alongside Freire I read a number of books looking at the issue of freedom in different ways (e.g. Fromm 1942, 1963, J S Mill originally published 1859, Chomsky 1972, 2003, Russell 1926, Krishnamurti 1954, Sen 1999) and I began to make some interesting links between human freedom, self-reflection and the transformation of consciousness.

## **B: Exploring the Themes through Critical Self-Reflection**

For knowledge claims to be meaningful, reflexivity is crucial. Attempting to understand why one thinks the way one does is essential for researching the world outside oneself. Winter (2003) explains:

“Reflexivity is that aspect of the process of making a judgement about reality (interpreting an event, a piece of data, some-one’s state of mind, etc.) that is dependent on (bent-back-into) our previous thoughts and experiences [...] the significance of the principle of reflexivity is that although most of our statements have a reflexive quality, we ignore this most of the time and treat our statements as being about external facts.” (p. 6-7)

Descartes and the Vedic philosophers understood how crucial this ‘drive inwards’ is in making sense of the world although they reached very different conclusions about the primary status of self-knowledge. This self-reflective process has therefore become an important component of my research and I acknowledge that my past

thoughts and experiences will have implications for the way that I ‘make a judgement about reality’.

Through self-reflective narrative I attempted to comprehend something of who I am and what my reasons for engaging in my research project were. My initial foray into autobiographical reflection was an attempt to think about some of the episodes in my life which may, consciously or unconsciously, affect the research process. This ‘prior knowledge’ requires investigation because it serves as a backcloth against which research takes place and indubitably shapes the outcome of that research. It impacts upon the sense I make of the data and the way that I collect that data in the first place. Self-reflection therefore helps to make explicit the frame of reference through which the researcher attempts to understand the world that he or she is exploring. ‘Social scientists are observers’, write Vidich and Lyman (2000):

“As observers of the world they also participate in it; therefore, they make their observations within a mediated framework, that is, a framework of symbols and cultural meanings given to them by those aspects of their life histories that they bring to the observational setting.” (p. 39)

However my intention was not only to understand episodes in my past that I might ‘bring’ to this research, I was also interested in exploring how self-reflection can bring about a fundamental shift in the self-world view point (the relationship between subject and object). Through self-reflective inquiry I hoped to shed light on the following issues:

- 1) The extent to which my own self-reflection contributed to transformations in my self-world view.
- 2) My shifting sense of belonging to, and participation in, or exclusion from particular contexts (communities, nations, cultures, societies, faith groups etc) with reference to my changing self-awareness.
- 3) My experiences of barriers to, and opportunities for, participation in formal learning contexts (schools and universities) and less formal learning contexts.

By highlighting certain autobiographical vignettes I tried to think about aspects of my life which could have influenced my research focus – why was I interested in initially researching a very specific discourse about vulnerable learners in India referred to as ‘special needs education’ and why might my interest in educational marginalisation go deeper than this. I also wanted to find out what I knew about my research topic already and how could I connect it with what I came to know? However, through writing this piece and exploring episodes where I felt myself to have been excluded I began to feel that self-consciousness (our self-world viewpoint) has an enormous impact upon the extent to which we feel included in, or excluded from, particular contexts, whether institutional and relatively well defined (e.g. schools and work places) or more abstract (e.g. cultures, faiths and nations). Self-reflective inquiry became more than a methodological tool for making my pre-conceptions explicit in a fixed way, it became a work in progress. I sought to understand how my sense of self shifted across different contexts (as an individual with mixed raced heritage travelling between the two countries his parents were born in) and the implications this had for my sense of belonging and participation. My research became more reflexive in



orientation – I used my own experiences in the field to ‘bend back on’ my sense of self, as Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest:

“Although reflexive ethnographies primarily focus on a culture or a subculture, authors use their own experiences in the culture reflexively to bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions.” (p. 740)

Through ongoing reflexive inquiry (coupled with my reading and empirical work) I was able to draw links between the emancipatory potential inherent in self-reflective inquiry (transcending the narrow confines of egotism by looking more deeply at the self-world viewpoint) and the liberation of Dalit communities through the transformation of consciousness.

### **C: Exploring the Themes Through Empirical Work in India**

In total I visited India three times and although I travelled to a number of regions the majority of my time was spent in the urban centres of Mumbai (in the state of Maharashtra) and Chennai (in the state of Tamil Nadu). I decided that organising my fieldwork in a series of phases, with periods of reading, writing and reflection in between, rather than one long stint in the field would be more profitable for a number of reasons. Such an approach facilitated the constant evolution of my research design. I could formulate and re-formulate research themes and explore issues and ideas which emerged from initial field visits in greater detail in subsequent fieldtrips. This is evidenced in the shift from studying barriers to participation in learning with reference to a ‘special educational needs’ discourse, to exploring educational marginalisation with reference to caste discrimination. Here I was adopting an

approach to research design that is consonant with some aspects of Grounded Theory.

Charmaz writes:

“Throughout the research process, grounded theorists develop analytic interpretations of their data to focus further data collection, which they use in turn to inform and refine their developing theoretical analyses.”

(2000, p. 509)

Such a strategy enables a more flexible approach to data collection and analysis. Each step of the analytic process moves towards ‘...the development, refinement and interrelation of concepts’ (p. 510). I felt that simultaneous collection and analysis of data was important and this led to some interesting interpretive reflections in the field (below I quote some extracts from my research journal which illustrate this point).

However, unlike Charmaz, I did not rigidly code data as it emerged – I used the insights gained through my ongoing spiritual and philosophical reflections as a lens or interpretive framework through which I filtered my data. It was this ongoing reflection that allowed me to refine my ideas and the substantive themes that I was working with.

## **Chronology of fieldwork**

### ***February-March 2002: Exploratory field visit, Mumbai***

After establishing contact with The Spastics Society of India (SSI), one of the largest disability organisations in the country, I undertook an exploratory fieldtrip. I was given a comprehensive overview of their various services and projects. This included visiting a UNICEF funded project aimed at integrating children with disabilities into mainstream education in the nearby slum community of Dharavi (reputed to be Asia’s

largest slum). I visited specialist services aimed at the education and health care of children with physical and cognitive impairments and talked with children from the SSI schools who had been included in mainstream education, as well as some of their peers and teachers. I visited career development schemes and talked with members of staff involved with the National Resource Centre for Inclusive Education (an Indo-Canadian project aimed at promoting the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream educational settings).

This period of fieldwork enabled me to explore a particular approach to inclusion and specific attempts made to reduce some of the barriers to participation in learning faced by children identified as disabled. In conjunction with the literature that I had been reading I began to move away from a psycho-medical model of disability to a social model which emphasised fundamental human rights and focussed attention on the social and cultural dimension of disability. It was not long before I became acquainted with a broader discourse about reducing the barriers to participation in learning of vulnerable learners. As a result of this first period of fieldwork I had already begun to shift the focus of my research as it had been outlined in my preliminary research proposal.

During this exploratory visit I also had a number of very illuminating experiences (documented in my research journal) which stimulated me to reflect quite deeply about my sense of self and notion of belonging. I began to make tentative links between identity, selfhood and participation, which I followed up in my reading upon return from the field.

***November 2002 – March 2003 First extended period of fieldwork. SSI, Mumbai and Vidya Sagar, Chennai***

Having refined my research focus I wanted to use this period of fieldwork to map out a case study that would help me to explore opportunities for, and barriers to, participation in learning in India. I was interested in using the case to investigate the complexities of the multiple barriers that confronted marginalised communities. As Stake points out the intention of case study is to investigate ‘multiple realities’ and to be ‘...open to the nuances of increasing complexity’ (p. 21).

Unfortunately during my time in Mumbai I did not map a case in the way that I had wanted to. This occurred for a variety of reasons although I shall here focus on only one. In attempting to ‘give something back’ to the organisation I was working with I agreed to take a paid post writing and editing various publications and working on a large international conference that they were running – The North/South Dialogue on Inclusion. From a personal point of view this was a very interesting and, at times, challenging opportunity and it also gave me a wage. However, given my daily responsibilities I was left with very little time to work on my own research.

Employment with SSI did give me a good insight into the significant barriers to participation in learning that children with disabilities face. I contemplated using SSI, or one of the projects run by them (e.g. the National Resource Centre for Inclusion - NRCI) as the focus for my case study, however this did not sit easily with my interest in moving away from seeing inclusive education as a ‘special needs/disability’ issue. Despite an organisational commitment to

“Increase the access of children to educational opportunities irrespective of disability, gender and social disadvantage” (NRCI Progress Report 2 (2000/01, p. 4)

I felt that ‘disability’ was still, unsurprisingly, the primary focus of the organisation. I am not at all critical of the organisation for this, I simply felt that I would not have been able to develop my research interests in the direction that I would have liked had I used an SSI run project to establish my case.

My research certainly benefited from a considerable amount of time during this period reflecting on issues relating to self-consciousness. I produced a 46,000-word research journal in which I interrogated my changing self-awareness and recorded my observations about identity and belonging as an Anglo-Asian with a Muslim heritage in Mumbai. I read the paper daily and noted articles relating to issues of identity and exclusion. One particularly emotive subject, which frequently made the pages of the *Times of India* and other journals, was the topic of Hindu-Muslim relations (commonly referred to in the press as ‘communalism’). Mumbai had witnessed some very violent communal conflagrations in 1992/3 and my sojourn in the city coincided with the tenth anniversary of what had become known as the Bombay riots. I began to think more deeply about the relationship between identity, individual/communal notions of self and exclusion. Here I cite two extracts from my research journal that illustrate the direction that my thinking was moving in:

***Journal Extract: Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> December***

*Interesting article in the Times of India today entitled 'Ghettos erode city's cosmopolitan spirit' (by Ahmed Abbas Rizvi) – Page 4 – Mumbai section. Fifth in a series 'looking at Mumbai's changing social landscape ten years after the post-Babri riots.'*

*"Spatial ghettoisation has been a part of Mumbai's landscape for decades. But fresh lines drawn after the demolition of Babri Masjid are possibly the most deeply etched. Ten years later the city's altered social geography stands testimony to the violence of the 1992-'93 riots." (Opening paragraph)*

*I have been struck by a growing feeling that it is quite clear when one is entering predominantly Muslim areas. The names of shops, the fact that some areas fly Pakistani flags, hoardings and signs that have Arabic script rather than the (Devnagari?) Hindi script, restaurants that specialise in Mughal cuisine etc. last time I was here I recall someone expressing distaste at a particular Muslim neighbourhood near Bandra and saying that she was always reluctant to visit it. In other newspaper articles I have read that Indian/Pakistani cricket matches are a potential source of tension.*

***Journal Extract: Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> December***

*I feel that it has been useful to be working in India – both in my capacity as publications assistant at the SSI (a suitably vague term which means that I can be asked to do just about anything) and in my capacity as a waiter/ ‘consultant from the USA’ at Boozabar [after offering my help in this restaurant owned by the director of SSI’s son]. There are frustrations and insights to be gained from both jobs. In the books that I have read by Cameron and Naipaul one gets a sense that both authors view some facets of ‘Indian’ life as utterly confusing and almost pointlessly futile (Cameron links this with the idea of doing one’s duty – performing one’s ‘dharma’ - when he talks about the servants or road sweepers who are there to perform a specific duty and only that duty). There is also a sense of energy expended unnecessarily – here I am reminded of the line from Chaucer – ‘he seemed busier than he was’. I am constantly reminded of these observations in my own encounters in India. Road sweeping in Bombay must be the very definition of futility. Waiters pick up and shuffle knives and forks backwards and forwards to convey a sense of activity, the search for particular quotes for particular pages by particular people – not because they are good quotes, or because they add anything to the programme but because certain people feel that others might be offended if they were not there. These are just some of the ‘futilities’ that I have encountered – time which could have been better spent in other pursuits is taken up by seemingly futile activity. Another thing that comes across – certainly in the writing of Naipaul in his more hostile *Area of Darkness* – is the affectation of Englishness – or an Indian perception of what Englishness is (based on a dated colonial legacy which, according to Naipaul was not Englishness even in the time of the Raj). Obviously the sorts of points that can be made in an autobiographical piece can not be made in an academic work with the same degree of*

*generalisation – but I am certainly struck by the affectation of a perceived Englishness that seems apparent in the ‘elite’ clientele of Boozabar. The dinner conversations strike me as vacuous (beauty and money) but I have to ask myself is this my ego getting in the way because I am being treated as little more than a servant (‘get me a stool’ ‘go and see if you have it’.) An exercise in humility. Perhaps I am convincing myself that conversations and discussion pieces are vacuous and superficial because I want to feel superior in some sense. This is certainly interesting to reflect upon in relation to the values and beliefs that I bring to my research project and the lens through which I view certain events, phenomena.*

*One SSI staff member that I was having a conversation with did seem to concur with this view of the upper echelons of society and said that it was a shame but there is almost no sense of retaining anything of Indian culture and history – is it a whole-sale appropriation of one (foreign) culture at the expense of one’s own? Obviously, again, I must be careful of generalisations but if this is something to do with the British legacy it will be interesting to explore in terms of the meeting of cultures and symbolic boundaries.*

*I am feeling very ‘homeless’ at the moment and am confronting many ‘identity’ and nationality issues. I feel neither Indian nor English – let alone Pakistani or Muslim. ‘Where do you come from’ is a question I am often asked – perhaps because my appearance and my speech do not tally. Naipaul also says in his book that it is an oft repeated question in India. Then again he had to contend with similar ‘identity’ issues being a Trinidadian Indian – looking like ‘a face in the crowd’ but feeling different. In fact ‘an Area of Darkness’ is a somewhat bitter attempt to explore India and himself.*



*The other book of his that I read 'India: A million mutinies now' is a more compassionate look at a variety of different Indian 'lives'. At different times I feel sympathy with these two different ways of looking at 'India'. I must confess that I am certainly not enjoying Boozabar elitism and find comfort in the sardonic Naipauli attacks – In some respects I am made to feel more English, or more pride in being British than I ever felt in England because of some frustrations/dislikes I feel about India. I find the constant spitting and hacking deeply unpleasant (British reserve?) and I hate the commute and the 'every person for themselves' attitude on busses and trains. Getting off the train at Churchgate the other day was a challenge – the deluge of people who flooded onto the train just to get a seat before it had even pulled into the station annoyed me – it was like a herd of demented wildebeest and had I not been ushered aside by a particular passenger I would probably have been injured. At other times I am greatly lifted by the ubiquity of spiritualism and then I relish the part of me that is from the Indian Subcontinent – I take pleasure in reading the Gita and the Upanishads and feeling a part of the country. But then the paper every day carries an article about 'terrorists' from Pakistan or communal rivalries between Muslims and Hindus and I realise that I can not even get away with calling myself Indian – my name denotes a 'Muslim' origin – and whilst a 'Salam aleikum' can help break the ice with a Muslim – my Muslim heritage can also put up a barrier during a casual conversation at a bus stop – when I gave my father's name to a person who was interested in the fact that I had said that he was born in Mysore – there seemed to be a lack of interest after I gave it as Parvez – a distinctively Muslim name. Perhaps I misread the situation but I felt that I had not.*

*How many of these identities, these divisions that separate me and define me, 'really' matter? The sense that identity is profoundly significant in the 'inclusion' debate is becoming increasingly strong. Learner diversity is about complex identity – the 'wholeness' of a person and the limiting effects that categorising people who are 'disabled' or 'Muslim' or 'learning impaired' or 'female' or 'Scheduled Caste' can have in education and in wider society. The problem is that these identities seem concrete and 'set in stone' which they are not. Projects in slums that aim at communal dialogue, or the Spastics Society's diligent attempts to 'prove' that disabled children can learn along side non-disabled – are attempts to break down barriers to participation – barriers which we make concrete but are little more than symbolic. Obviously some barriers are physical and more tangible – (the absence of a ramp in schools, the long distance children have to travel, enforced child labour, poverty and ill health etc. However because they are more tangible they may also have more practical solutions – build a ramp, crack down on child labour etc. Poverty is a harder issue to address.*

*Inclusion is as much about changing values, attitudes and perceptions as it is about tangible processes like integrating children identified as having special educational needs, signing the Salamanca statement, committing to EFA or initiating literacy campaigns, building ramps etc. The dividing lines that separate human beings must be shown to be symbolic. The idea of human diversity is important for moving beyond the narrow categorisation of people according to labels that 'do not have to matter' (disabled, female, learning impaired) but if we go too far down the path do we risk a radical individualism? – Every one is different, what is good for one can not necessarily be said to be good for another – if applied to education this could result in*

*a fairly anarchic self centred view of what education should be about (each to their own). Rights based thinking is one way to address this problem – all humans are invested with certain inalienable rights – but this can tie us into some fairly exclusivistic ways of thinking. Empathy can help us respect difference – inculcating the values of respect for diversity, respect for the other and understanding the effects of marginalisation 'from the inside' – it also binds us more strongly than rights. These ideas are very ill thought out at the moment but because they arise from personal conviction – I would like to see if I could explore them at some point. NB look at Foucault's care of the self, technologies of the self arguments.*

*These 'symbolic boundaries' might also be understood in terms of the central tenet in much eastern philosophy (in the Gita, Upansihads, Buddhism) that although we see the ego as fixed and concrete part of us – it is really little more than a fixing in the mind, the giving of an artificial coherence and identity, to a bundle of experiences. Who I think I am only seems to be fixed and we can dislodge the certainty attached to these ideas if we imagine ourselves born to another family, at another time or if we do something 'out of character' as we see it – we realise how impermanent these perceptions of selfhood and identity are. If symbolic boundaries can be broken down Inclusion stands a better chance. Symbolic boundaries can be broken down by inculcating the capacity to empathise – not by teaching children about the 'rights' of other human beings.*

***6<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> February 2003: exploratory visit to Chennai***

During this period I had a very useful visit to SSI's sister organisation Vidya Sagar (VS) based in Chennai. Operating a range of services similar in scope to SSI (including specialist learning centres for the physically and mentally impaired, community based rehabilitation programmes, partnerships with mainstream schools etc) there were also a number of projects and partnerships which I felt could provide the basis for a very interesting case study. Whilst I was with VS I visited a privately funded school (The Teddy School in Tirrumungalam) that had been financed through a joint venture between the Body Shop UK and an export industry. The Teddy Trust employed people from the local communities, and the school educated their children who faced multiple barriers to participation in learning (caste, disability, poverty, HIV/AIDS). I accompanied a consultant from VS on one of her regular support trips to the school intended to facilitate alternative pedagogic practice. Classroom observations, community visits, interviews and discussions with the VS consultant, teachers, pupils, parents and foreign staff employed by Teddy Exports provided me with a very interesting insight into some of the complexities involved in providing learning opportunities where multiple barriers existed. One particular episode cemented my decision to focus on caste discrimination - when I accompanied a young Dalit boy with mobility problems back to his village. The diary extract below provides an indication of how disturbed and fascinated I was during one of my first personal encounters with a Dalit community:

***Extract, journal entry: Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> February***

*... After school we travelled on the bus with a young boy (O), disabled as a result of Polio, who came from a Dalit village. I wanted to visit his home, see what conditions*

were like in his community and perhaps ask his parents a few questions about their experiences of their child's and their own education. Dharavi had not prepared me for the chilling aspect of this poverty. We were taken by a group of boys including (O) a less direct way than they usually travelled back from school. I found this out later – (M) [Community Worker employed by VS] explained that the children had taken us this way because they were embarrassed by the rubbish and pollution along the other route (the route that we took was, to my eyes, none too pleasant anyway – past open and malodorous drains and pigs rummaging through garbage etc). This was the first sign that made me feel that I should not be intruding on their life for the sake of academia – I felt voyeuristic and ashamed to be asking the children to take me to their village. M explained that typical occupations for these villagers (who lived apart from the main town because of pollution/untouchability rules) would be pig rearing, rubbish collecting, rag and newspaper picking – all activities that were associated with untouchability and considered to be unclean. The village was not only located on the outskirts of town it was also located near a burial ground for people who had died of unnatural causes or committed suicide – again another aspect of impurity. The poverty and squalor was all too evident and unlike Dharavi where I felt at least a fairly cheery community spirit there seemed to be a coldness to this place which was quite unpleasant and all the more marked because of the unrelenting heat. On the way to the village (O) had fallen and was too tired to continue with his stick – I offered to carry him (a job that his brother usually did, but he was late today). He looked embarrassed and did not want me to – instead his friend gave him a piggy back.

We stopped to watch a man who was weaving hair that he had collected from around the place (people's discarded hair after brushing) – with rags that he had picked –

*these chords were then combined with conch shells and pom poms to make hangings for homes and vehicles to ward off evil spirits. I stopped to take a picture and, as (M) explained later, the mans wife emerged from the family home vociferously objecting in Tamil – she thought I was a journalist – “why was I coming around here taking pictures of their poverty and misery” she screamed at me. M explained that I was a student and wanted to see the village that one of the children from the school that I was studying attended. This apparently appeased her somewhat. All this happened unbeknownst to me although the hostility was evident enough. After I took my picture I felt that I wanted to give them something in return so I asked if I could buy one of these charms and gave them 100 rupees (they wanted 3) and told them that I did not want the change. The woman’s attitude to me changed completely and she then followed me to the next house and was laughing and repeating my ‘thank yous’ and gestures of ‘very nice’ when I saw more charms. I also bought a charm that (O’s) father had made and also gave him 100 rupees. On reflection I really need to think about how I am going to behave when I come to similar situations again – there were plenty of other families that I did not make these piecemeal gestures to and although it may have provided food for the family for a week I had no idea of the sorts of strife that I may have caused with the other families (I didn’t buy another charm from another man who was holding out his when I left).*

*I also tape recorded a few questions that I asked (O’s) father about his experiences of education and his hopes for his children and how he felt disability had affected his son. I felt very bad about getting out my recorder in a village with such poverty and one man did indeed ask how much it had cost me. I therefore hurried a few questions and then brought the interview to a quick close. Essentially the father had never been*

*to school – he wanted his children to go to school and learn so that they could function in society. He says that they don't seem to be grasping what they are learning in school and feels they are lost. I asked what he hoped his children would do after school – he said let him study and after that he might get a job with the Teddy Trust – they are depending on Teddy to provide something for him so that he can become independent in his life – he said that he wasn't able to support his children at all. At this point I felt very awkward and intrusive and turned to M to ask if she could think of any questions – she looked equally awkward (and she confirmed that she had indeed felt uncomfortable being there) – she suggested a question on disability – I asked had he found his sons disability a problem (very badly worded question but I was finding it difficult to think on the spot) – especially with his son standing close by listening to his disability defined as 'a problem' – his father said there was not much awareness of polio – they did not know of or could not afford any treatment. They are glad that he has Teddy in his life but he has difficulty coming all the way from school back home – they want some sort of an aid for him so that he could be more mobile.*

*If one good thing came from this experience it is that M said that she had asked the teachers about (O's) mobility and his journey to and from school – they had said that it was not a problem but she realised that she was now going to have to change her assessment and recommend a hand operated tricycle or some mobility device.*

*I am really going to have to struggle to think of ways of getting around these ethical dilemmas – I do not want to be intrusive but I do think that it is important to get into the communities and explore links between schools and communities because if this does not occur then things like M realising that the child needed help with his*

*mobility would not have been picked up on. Also if one does not understand what life is like in these communities how can one hope to suggest improvements for a meaningful education for these children?*

During this period of fieldwork then, despite not having been able to use my time as effectively as I would have liked to explore barriers to participation in learning, I narrowed down the substantive themes of my research. In the first instance I was interested in exploring the relationship between self-consciousness/identity and inclusion/exclusion and I believed that my own critical self-reflection could provide me with a useful source of data. I had also identified the way in which I wanted to explore barriers to participation in learning – using the lens of caste discrimination - a particularly volatile and emotive identity issue with a long history in India. After visiting Social Action Movement an organisation that had links with VS through a mutual partner I decided that my next period of fieldwork would be carried out in Tamil Nadu.

***February – April 2004: Second period of extended fieldwork. Engaging with SAM***

With two substantive themes of the thesis taking shape and having decided to return to Tamil Nadu - the next phase of data collection required me to define the parameters of a case study. I decided to use Social Action Movement as the focus of the case study. SAM were an obvious choice and gaining access was straightforward given their well established links with Vidya Sagar. Furthermore, as an organisation promoting Dalit empowerment by emphasising education and self-determination, SAM promised to be an enormously rich data source.



Stake (1995) distinguishes between intrinsic and instrumental case study. The former denotes a study where the case itself (in its particularity) is prioritised, the latter refers to a case study where one is using the case to explore certain issues and ideas. I believe that my research incorporates an instrumental case study that helped me to deepen my understanding of the three research themes. It is not an in-depth exploration of SAM as an institution, nor is it an ethnographic account of the lives and livelihoods of Dalit communities in the region. In this sense I find myself in agreement with Stake's (1995) comment that:

“The function of research is not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it” (p. 43)

My engagement with SAM is an attempt to ‘sophisticate the beholding’ of a complex set of issues relating to the transformation of Dalit consciousness and the barriers to, and opportunities for, participation in learning that they face. This empirical dimension allowed me to illuminate, illustrate and explore some of the related complexities. I have followed advice given by Yin (2003) and used multiple sources of evidence (semi structured and open interview, observation, documentary analysis (including newspapers, annual reports, film), informal discussion, community visits etc). I have also sought to establish a coherent chain of evidence and fit data into ongoing explanation building by constantly reformulating my theoretical understandings (p. 34).

### *Narrowing the case*

Given the variety of projects that SAM run and the number of people that they employ, the next phase of the design strategy was to perform what Bogdan and Biklen (1998) refer to as an *internal sampling* exercise ‘the decisions you make once you have a general idea of what you are studying’ (p. 61) aimed at narrowing the focus of the study. I had to think about who to talk to, which projects to engage with, the type and number of documents to review etc. Fortuitously, on my first visit to SAM, the Project Officer (my initial contact and a key informant) told me about a survey exploring school drop out that had been conducted by Dalit children in their home villages. This survey was part of a bigger project called the Children’s Parliament which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Seven. Here I was presented with a perfect opportunity to sharpen the focus of my case. I attended a meeting at which the Education Ministers (the young Dalits who fed back to the Children’s Parliament on education issues) compiled the results of the survey. I was less concerned with collating the statistics quantitatively and far more interested in the discussions that followed and which provided a fascinating insight into the multiple barriers to participation in learning that these children faced.

Following the meeting of the Education Ministers at the Children’s Parliament I decided to explore some of the themes that were raised by the children in greater detail. Visiting a village would give me the opportunity to talk to some of the teachers at the local high school, observe the evening tuition centre (from which these children were drawn) that SAM ran and talk to the local facilitator and other members of the community.

Of the 44 villages that were listed in the survey one village not only had the highest number of dropouts it also had some of the most vocal participants in the ensuing debate. In addition I was told that it also played host to the largest supplementary education centre (evening tuition centre for young Dalits set up by SAM to minimise the risk of school drop out). For these reasons I decided that a visit to this particular village would generate a more in-depth understanding of the barriers to participation in learning that these children faced.

Observing at the Children's Parliament meeting and eliciting more detailed responses from some of the participants provided me with a 'child's eye' view of the barriers to learning that existed. By visiting a government school, the Dalit community that it served and the tuition centre that SAM had established in the village, I was given an insight into some of the issues as perceived by adults with a variety of (sometimes conflicting) interests. These included teachers, parents and SAM workers.

I conducted a loosely structured group discussion/interview at the village high school in an attempt to teacher perspectives. I used the occasion of a staff meeting to ask questions to a group of teachers (including the headmaster) about their perceptions of the issues confronting local children pertaining to schooling and employment, school-community relations and what motivated them to become teachers. Following this discussion I recorded an informal open-ended interview with one of the most vocal participants (the Tamil teacher) who seemed particularly interested in sharing his personal insights having grown up in the community and having faced similar issues.

In addition to exploring the attitudes and views of those who delivered education it was important to visit the community that the school served and talk to children and parents who were on the receiving end of educational services. Again this served to deepen my understanding of barriers to, and opportunities for, participation in learning because it revealed some of the issues affecting a different group of stakeholders and pointed to some alternative explanations for issues that had been differently interpreted by the teachers (e.g. resource shortage). I observed during one session at the supplementary educational centre and took video footage for subsequent analysis. I recorded an informal discussion with one mother who sat on the Parent-Teacher Association and conducted a brief interview with the SAM volunteer who helped to co-ordinate the centre

These varied experiences provided me with a base-line understanding of some of the barriers to, and opportunities for participation in learning that existed in a particular school and the Dalit community that it served and as seen through the eyes of different stakeholders (children, teachers, parents, SAM staff). It then became important to deepen my understanding of the SAM *modus operandi* – the philosophies that underpinned their commitment to Dalit emancipation and the strategies that they employed in an attempt to secure it. I also wanted to understand the links that SAM was making between the educational exclusion of Dalits and the system of values and beliefs which perpetuated Dalit subjugation.

### ***Key informant interviews***

As part of my engagement with SAM I held a series of interviews with some of the key decision makers in the organisation. These provided me with an overview of the

organisation and an understanding of the theoretical and philosophical context within which it operates. Although all of the key informants were involved in many aspects of the day-to-day running of the projects I was not looking for a grassroots perspective as such, but an understanding of the ideas and beliefs that drove the organisation. The interviews I conducted were all semi-structured and open ended. I had an idea of what I wanted to explore and therefore identified a number of topics to broach (e.g. the construction and de-construction of Untouchable/Dalit identities, religion and its perceived role in contesting and affirming caste identity, how SAM's projects fitted in with the values espoused by the interviewee etc). However, these discussions were all very wide ranging and I gathered a lot of useful data by following tangents. In total I interviewed Father M, the founder and organisational figurehead, three times, once at the beginning of my fieldwork, once after my visit to the Children's Parliament and once at the end of my fieldwork. Spacing the interviews out like this allowed me to discuss emergent issues and ideas shortly after they arose. This was part of my strategy for ongoing analysis and theory construction in the field. As I had gained a better insight into the practices and values of the organisation I was able to pursue these themes in greater depth in each subsequent interview. Father M was a very engaging and inspirational man who knew a lot about the Dalit movement generally as well as the local issues that impacted upon SAM. He proved to be an invaluable source of information.

I had many informal discussions with Mr S the Project Officer who had a very good overview of SAM's projects. In conjunction with Mr S, I determined which projects would be most useful to visit and which members of staff would be useful to

interview. At the end of my fieldwork I conducted a more formal interview with him in which I discussed a variety of the ideas and themes that had emerged.

### ***The Dalit Media Network (DMN)***

I gathered a lot of useful data by visiting the DMN in Chennai, a semi-autonomous body funded by SAM to facilitate Dalit engagement with the media. Their work (which I describe in more detail in Chapter Six) involves promoting Dalit journalism as well as challenging the exclusive practices of more mainstream media.

Firstly, I conducted an in-depth interview with Mr P, the DMN editor/manager. As with my other key-informant interviews I was hoping to get an insight into the system of values and beliefs that drove the work of SAM generally, and in this instance, the DMN specifically. I therefore knew that I wanted to talk about issues pertaining to the construction and deconstruction of Untouchable/Dalit consciousness – and in particular the role of the DMN in challenging caste inequality. However, again I was happy for the interview to range over a variety of topics and I gained some very useful information by employing this approach. As with other key informant interviews, it was often difficult disentangling personal viewpoints from organisational messages (see Chapter Six), however I do not regard this as an obstacle preventing me from uncovering the ‘truth’ but an important insight into the complexity of issues such as the transformation of Dalit consciousness.

### ***Library research at the Dalit Media Network***

In addition to the key informant interview I also collected data by using the DMN library to read, note and photocopy a variety of books and tracts written by Dalit

activists. This literature that would not have been easily accessible through UK libraries and it gave me an interesting insight into many of the key ideas emerging from the Dalit emancipation movement. I got hold of autobiographical literature, poetry and social, political and theological Dalit writing some of which had been instrumental in shaping the Dalit liberation movement and communicating Dalit issues to a wider, English-speaking audience (e.g. Dangle's *Poisoned Bread: translations from modern Marathi Dalit literature* (1992) and Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2004)).

### ***Exploring Dalit media***

Analysing some of the DMN publications also provided a rich source of data about the transformation of Dalit consciousness. I obtained the final copy of their English medium magazine *The Dalit* (of which only three had been produced before it was discontinued) and I bought a copy of the DMN documentary *Untouchable Country* (2001). The film proved to be a very useful presentation device as well as a good source of information about the Dalit movement and caste discrimination in Tamil Nadu. In conjunction with the interview I conducted with Mr P and my analysis of SAM's annual reviews (see below), these media products enabled me to get a sense of the 'alternative' spaces promoting the 'subaltern' voice that were being created by SAM.

### ***Exploring SAM's child labour project (Kanchipuram)***

Visiting Kanchipuram had a dual purpose. Firstly, I was interested in SAM's work relating to a particularly pernicious barrier to Dalit participation in learning that had achieved international media attention – the issue of bonded labour in Kanchipuram's

famous silk industry. Secondly, as the administrative headquarters of the district, I was also able to interact with some of the key bureaucrats including the most senior administrator in education (the Chief Education Officer).

I was able to extend my understanding of the SAM *modus operandi* by conducting ‘key-informant’ interviews with two project co-ordinators. These provided me with an overview of the project and an insight into the significant barrier to participation in learning that bonded labour presents to Dalit communities. Once I had an overview of the project I then ‘entered the field’. I visited a local school SAM were working with which had taken children released from bonded labour and I recorded conversations with the deputy head teacher and some of the children who had been bonded labourers. I then visited two silk-looms and recorded brief conversations with some of the workers (children and adults) whilst observing for myself the conditions inside the silk looms. After this I attended a session at an evening tuition centre providing non-formal education for bonded labourers where I talked with the facilitator, spoke to some of the children and recorded a conversation with one of the parents. Exploring the issue of bonded labour helped me to realise the enormous difficulties facing an organisation trying to affect a shift in Dalit consciousness.

### ***Talking to government bureaucrats***

Mr R (Project Worker for the anti-child labour initiatives) was one of my most important and helpful key informants. In addition to the many valuable insights that he gave me in our formal and informal conversations he also sacrificed a great deal of his time accompanying me into the communities and acting as an interpreter.

Significantly, he helped me to secure meetings with local government bureaucrats. As



a result I was able to conduct an in-depth interview with the district child-labour co-ordinator, an interview with the District Elementary Education Officer and conversations with the PA to the District Education Officer and the Chief Education Officer who had over-all responsibility for the administration of education in the Kanchipuram district. Often these bureaucrats were suspicious of my intentions and heavily guarded conversations took place under sufferance (particularly if my association with SAM became an issue). Nevertheless I did gather some useful information as a result of these interviews. The interview with the district child-labour co-ordinator gave me a very interesting insight into local government strategies for reducing bonded labour although the co-ordinator was clearly reluctant to identify it as a significant regional problem given the figure of 300 bonded labourers he quoted me, a statistic that did not tally with an exploratory study conducted by SAM in 2003 or a Human Rights Watch report published in the same year.

Talking to the educational bureaucrats was helpful in so far as it enabled me to understand how education is delivered and organised at the district level and the District Elementary Education Officer very graciously took time out of a busy schedule to answer some questions in reasonable depth. However I was clearly little more than a nuisance to the CEO who, when I asked him about some of the significant problems in rural schools, told me that there were none! I was not allowed to record my conversations with them and at times I had to use ethically dubious methods for securing a meeting in the first place. For example the CEO only agreed to talk to me after I explained that I was interested in exploring disability and educational marginalisation and that I had been working with Vidya Sagar. This was

not untrue as such but it was being economical with the truth vis-à-vis the main focus of my research.

### ***Documentary analysis***

I used a variety of documents either produced by SAM or relating to their work to further illuminate my case study. Annual Reports (SAM Info 2000/01; 2001/02 and 2002/03) provided me with a wealth of data about all of the projects and services run by the organisation. Because the reports ranged over three consecutive periods I was able to analyse how the projects had developed over time and identify to what extent organisational commitments, priorities, beliefs and values had changed or remained constant. Given that the annual reports provided a synoptic account of the organisations work over time they were an invaluable data source for conceptualising the SAM philosophy. Not only was I able to gain an overview of the various awareness raising projects and campaigning initiatives, I was also able to identify certain techniques that were instrumental in their attempts to encourage Dalits to critically reflect upon the circumstances of their oppression with a view to affecting a shift in self-awareness.

I also looked at a variety of documents relating to specific projects and/or investigations. I was given a detailed press release about a public hearing into bonded labour convened by SAM and the Tamil Nadu Campaign Against Child Labour; the summary report of a SAM investigation into bonded labour that was submitted to the hearing and newspaper cuttings resulting from the national media interest that such campaigning had generated. This documentary analysis not only gave me an appreciation of the extent of the problem and a more nuanced understanding of the

issues involved but also provided useful exemplars of the methods that SAM employ to explore and raise awareness of major issues impacting upon Dalit communities in the region.

### ***Observing at a government welfare school and visiting a Dalit community***

I conducted a series of observation sessions in classrooms in a government run welfare school aimed at children from Dalit and low-caste backgrounds. I visited the school twice, on the first occasion to interview the head and deputy head teacher and explore some of their views about the barriers to participation in learning that Dalit children in the region faced. During my second visit I observed in some of the lessons. Seeing participation in learning as more than just the simple presence/absence of children in schools it was important that I tried to investigate some of barriers to participation in learning that can arise *within* schools. Here I focussed on pedagogical techniques, the classroom environment, curriculum issues, the children's behaviour and disciplinary measures amongst other things. Although these observation sessions were not systematic I took video footage to assist me. This proved to be a very useful tool for subsequent analysis because I was able to return to the footage with new ideas and avenues for exploration. However it did present ethical concerns which I alluded to above. Using the data gathered from these sessions I was able to contrast not only my earlier experiences in the Teddy School but also the insights that I had gained from engaging with the various informal learning projects run by SAM.

A visit to the local Dalit village that the school served allowed me to talk with some of the parents and two young people. They described some of their experiences of education; the difficulties that they faced accessing employment; some of the issues

that affected school-community relations and talked about the community development projects that SAM ran such as the pre-school. These experiences reinforced findings from my previous visit to a school and one of its communities and a catalogue of similar issues were raised such as corruption in school administration, poverty enforced drop out and the benefits which SAM's informal educational initiatives brought to the community.

### **Language, Communication, Power and Status**

All of my key informant interviews were conducted in English with people who possessed sophisticated language skills. I was therefore able to address and communicate complex issues in a language that both the interviewees and I were conversant in. In marked contrast talking to parents, children, some teachers and some SAM staff members through an interpreter was a far more stilted affair and something which I felt uncomfortable doing. Firstly, given the mediated nature of communication, I did not feel able to establish any kind of rapport. I was also working with someone who became a close friend of mine as an interpreter and this had advantages and disadvantages. She was probably far more enthusiastic about my project than a paid interpreter would have been and she sacrificed a great deal of time and energy to assist me, for which I am enormously grateful. However, since she was not a professional interpreter there may have been occasions where someone with training, or who did not have the same kind of relationship with me, would have done something differently. Two issues are pertinent here. V, my interpreter, came from a Brahmin family (the highest caste) and at times she felt uncomfortable with the vitriolic anti-Brahminism espoused by SAM (discussed elsewhere). At certain points in my research both she and I felt a palpable conflict of interest and sentiment and

although we often discussed these later to reduce the tension it did cause problems. At times I was uncertain whether I was getting an impartial rendition of what had just been said or feedback that was imbued with her own personal feelings. At other times, V would pause mid translation, and explain that because she spoke an upper caste (Sanskritised or Brahminised) version of Tamil she did not know how to communicate something in, what she referred to as, the vernacular. Some people might argue that this is a serious flaw in my research, that the personal beliefs and values of my interpreter could have seriously affected the way in which issues were communicated to me and that what I heard may not have been an accurate report of ‘reality’ or what was said. In my defence I would argue that such factors are an aspect of the complex and contested nature of the world that I have chosen to study. I am exploring the complexities of caste consciousness and in many ways the interaction of conflicting sentiments was very revealing about the dynamics of caste consciousness.

At many points in my research I became conscious of the symbolic and, at times very real, power that language is invested with. Ironically, in a quest to discover an aspect of my heritage by visiting India, it was my ability to speak English which took me around a linguistically diverse country given the colonial legacy. An ability to speak English also carried with it status – the potential to command respect, and more importantly, employment. Some people were embarrassed because they could not talk to me in English. Mr R, project officer for the child labour project, not only explained to me that if you don’t speak English, you don’t have as many opportunities, he also constantly apologised for his own English skills and insisted that we conduct our first interview in Tamil through an interpreter. Later I discovered we were actually able to

communicate very well in English and he in fact helped me with translation during some of my field visits.

Language has therefore been a significant methodological consideration and has added an interesting dimension to my insight into the complexity of status and power in India. It has played a large part in determining who my key informants were, how they came to be key decision makers in the first place (they would not have been able to perform the roles without fluency in English), and the nature of my interaction with them. Linguistic nuances such as the Sanskritised Tamil that my interpreter spoke have also affected the interpretive act that is so crucial to qualitative research. At times my 'mother-tongue' distanced me from the country in which my father was born (by forcing mediated communication with people in the villages) on other occasions it brought me nearer by enabling me to communicate with a certain strata (the socio-economically advantaged) – all over the country.

### **Insider/Outsider**

An important methodological issue became conspicuous during the interview with Mr P namely the ambiguity of my insider/outsider status. Two episodes drove home that there was no such thing as a line which clearly differentiated me from my 'research subjects' (the methodological ambition of a more positivistic approach to research). After the interview Mr P asked me about my background. I gave my standard response which I had become used to rattling off to avoid revealing my Muslim heritage. 'My father was born in Bangalore, my mother is English and an important reason for deciding to base my research in India had been to explore an unexamined aspect of this heritage'. Mr P. responded that surely my father could have taught me

something about India. I explained that I had grown up in a small rural community in England with limited opportunity to explore my Asian heritage. However as I reflected later it is possible that Mr P was not so much interested in why I hadn't been provided with a rich insight into Indian culture growing up in England, and more concerned as to whether I had been wilfully occluded from learning about what he referred to as 'the real problem in India' i.e. caste. Might Mr P's uncertainty about quite how to pigeonhole me have affected the interview process? I could have been imagining it but I felt that I was being tested when, at lunch, Mr P asked what I would like to eat – he listed a variety of options and closed with the statement 'perhaps you would like some meat?' Whilst sitting in the DMN foyer waiting to speak with him I had been reading an article in the *The Dalit* explaining the symbolic purity attached to vegetarianism within the Hindu worldview. By implication meat eaters (Dalits, Muslims etc) were symbolically impure and morally defective. I was quick to say that I would like some meat for lunch just in case Mr P was attempting to establish where my sympathies lay. Ironically I had been a vegetarian for seven years when I was younger and it had been an ethical choice but it had more to do with a belief that it caused unnecessary suffering to animals and nothing to do with the fact that I thought it somehow defiled me or rendered me impure.

## **Web-based Research**

During my research I have made considerable use of the Internet. I have downloaded a variety of texts that would either not have been readily accessible, or were easier to get hold of online. Of particular significance were on-line editions of the iconic Dalit leader Dr Ambedkar's (see Chapter Five) writing and speeches. The University of Columbia (New York), an institute that Ambedkar had attended between 1913-1916,

hosted a very useful website which contained an annotated version of his classic text *The Annihilation of Caste* written in 1936 and an online version of his work *The Buddha and his Dhamma* written in 1956. [www.ambedkar.org](http://www.ambedkar.org) described as a ‘dalit e-forum’ also contained on-line copies of many of Ambedkar’s more obscure writings and speeches as well as news and information about contemporary Dalit issues. Another website that proved very useful was [www.countercurrents.org](http://www.countercurrents.org) described as an ‘alternative news site’ and based in Kerala. This site contained articles by Dalit activists and allowed me to explore new issues as they emerged. For example, from this site I gained an insight into how Dalit’s had been affected by the Tsunami that I refer to in Chapter One.

Other useful websites included the official Mahatma Gandhi eArchive ([web.mahatma.org.in](http://web.mahatma.org.in)) from which I obtained a copy of Gandhi’s *My Varnashrama Dharma* addressing his beliefs about caste. The government of India website was very useful for researching national educational policy, practice and statistics as well as welfare policy relating to the Scheduled Castes (government terminology for Dalits). The Tamil state government website ([www.tn.gov.in](http://www.tn.gov.in)) provided similar information on a regional level. Census information was available from the government run [www.censusindia.net](http://www.censusindia.net). From national and international websites belonging to organisations interested in the Education for All agenda (e.g. DFID, UNESCO) I was able to download policy commitments and country specific information relating to India. For example *The Dakar Framework for Action* (2000) and the DFID report *Towards Responsive Schools* (2000).



I used the new academic search engine Google Scholar to download relevant journal articles (e.g. an article by Racine and Racine (1998) entitled *Dalit Identities and the Dialectics of Oppression and Emancipation in a Changing India: The Tamil Case and Beyond*) and downloaded more obscure work from, or on, authors that I was interested in.

Use of the Internet for academic research is in its infancy and there are difficulties as well as benefits associated with it. Evidently there is a wealth of information on a great range of topics and the speed at which one can access it is an enormous advance on traditional library research. However much of this information does not conform to traditionally acceptable academic standards (peer review etc). Therefore I have had to be selective with the information that I have used – whilst one is fairly safe in quoting information published on a government of India website it is best not to use ‘historical facts’ about Aryan civilisation from a white supremacist website (something which I stumbled upon when trying to research the Aryan invasion thesis as an explanation for caste oppression!)

### **Knowledge and Freedom: Linking the Methods with the Themes**

In this chapter I have tried to establish a link between the methods that I have used, the theories that I have developed and the themes that I have explored. At the heart of all these research dimensions lie my fundamental beliefs about the nature of self-consciousness and the possibilities for human relationship generated by self-transcendence. My commitment to qualitative research and an epistemology that emphasises intersubjective modes of knowing arises from a belief that the self is not the cardinal point of certainty in human understanding. This is the sense in which I

believe Buber was correct to argue that knowledge is not attained by “...remaining on the shore and watching the foaming waves...” but by making the venture and casting oneself in. In all of my interactions ‘in the field’ I have kept firmly in mind the enormous complexity of the worlds that I was engaging with and the multiple layers of meaning that I, and others, attach to these worlds. My reflection and analysis represent an attempt to illuminate in interesting ways, through my interactions with others, enormously complex phenomena; they do not represent an attempt to map an objective domain. Freedom is critical here, freedom from an egocentric perception of the world where one’s own beliefs and values are held to be paramount. Furthermore, in trying to understand important issues relating to Dalit emancipation and education, I have used a variety of writings and ideas about self-consciousness and critical self-reflection which view self-transcendence as a liberation. All of these writings expound the view that to fully understand the self one must reach outside the self – an act which brings a sense of freedom. Central to the theoretical dimension of my research is linking Dalit liberation with the freedom that critical self-reflection brings. In this thesis I argue that to know and to be free requires us to journey beyond the narrow confines of a limited self-consciousness.

## **Chapter Three: Reading to Develop Thematic and Conceptual Understanding**

In this chapter I discuss the reading that I have done which has helped me to think more deeply about the three research themes. Perhaps the most significant concept in this thesis is that of ‘self-reflection’ – it is explicit in research themes one and two and, as will become clear below, implicit in theme three because, I argue, only the most superficial participation can occur if human beings are not encouraged to engage in self-reflection. A significant proportion of my reading has therefore been orientated towards shedding light on this crucial concept. As such when I explore Dalit emancipation (theme two) and Dalit participation in learning (theme three) I ask to what extent might an understanding of the processes involved in, and consequences of, self-reflection facilitate both.

Section 1 looks at the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry (research theme one). In Part A I draw on the ideas of a range of writers to consider what is involved in the process of self-reflective inquiry as well as what might be the end goal(s) of such a process. One of the most important dimensions for many of these thinkers is the sense of freedom (liberation, emancipation) that results from looking deeply into one’s self. At the heart of this process lies a transformation of consciousness based upon an understanding that attachment to personal, individualistic or egocentric frames of reference is constraining and by weakening this attachment the boundaries of understanding are expanded. An aspect of this evolution is the recognition that the personal viewpoint can only ever be a partial viewpoint and as such is tantamount to bondage the more we cling to it. I not only look at a number

of religious perspectives but also touch upon Jung's psychoanalytic theories which broach the notion of an 'Unconscious' in the self-transformative quest.

Another crucial feature of self-reflective inquiry according to the literature that I draw on is the extent to which it encourages us to reconsider the self-world viewpoint. By this I mean the relationship between self (subject) and that which appears to be outside self (object – or the external world consisting of other selves and the environment in which we are situated). I say 'appears' to be because I focus on a set of ideas which call into question the Cartesian dichotomy between subject and object. In Section 1B I reflect on the ideas of two writers in particular (David Bohm and Martin Buber) to develop an understanding of participation as the transformation of a limited or 'fragmented' self-world viewpoint (to use Bohm's term).

Section 2 addresses research themes two (self reflection and Dalit emancipation) and three (Dalit participation in learning). I build upon the ideas and concepts developed in Section One as a framework to explore the freedom and liberation of specific communities in India that have been subjugated as a result of the caste system. Specifically in relation to theme three I think about some of the features of an education that might help to facilitate the liberation of oppressed groups. I draw on a number of thinkers who foreground human freedom and in particular Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

## **Section One, Part A: The Transformative Potential of Self-Reflective Inquiry**

One of the defining features of human consciousness is our capacity for self-reflection, our ability to introspect and ruminate upon the circumstances of our

existence. In his seminal text *The Phenomenon of Man* (originally published 1947) Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest and a distinguished palaeontologist, defined this reflective process as:

“...the power acquired by a consciousness to turn in upon itself, to take possession of itself *as of an object* endowed with its own particular consistence and value: no longer merely to know oneself; no longer merely to know, but to know that one knows. By this individualisation of [herself] in the depths of [herself], the living element, which heretofore has been spread out and divided over a diffuse circle of perceptions and activities, was constituted for the first time as a *centre* in the form of a point at which all the impressions and experiences knit themselves together and fuse into a unity that is conscious of its own organisation.” (1965, p.183)

For de Chardin the point at which hominids first became self-reflective creatures was a critical juncture in what he believed was the evolutionary development of consciousness. In poetic language he describes the possibilities that are opened up:

“The being who is the object of [her] own reflection, in consequence of that very doubling back upon [herself], becomes in a flash able to raise [herself] into a new sphere. In reality, another world is born. Abstraction, logic, reasoned choice and inventions, mathematics, art, calculation of space and time, anxieties and dreams of love – all these activities of *inner life* are nothing else than the effervescence of the newly formed centre as it explodes onto itself.” (Ibid)

The ability to engage in rigorous introspection, argues de Chardin, is a specific aspect of human consciousness that marks it out as qualitatively distinct from the type of consciousness that occurs in other sentient creatures. As such, with the birth of self-

reflective consciousness a new evolutionary dynamic is ushered in – consciousness can be augmented and radically transformed as a result of the efforts and volition of the individual human agent. This is the instantaneous leap from instinct to thought that occurs at the threshold of reflection and, for de Chardin, Life (with a capital L), which he defines as an ascent of consciousness, takes a distinctive turn when it crosses this threshold.

One could object that the problem with de Chardin's thesis is that he assumes knowledge of non-human consciousness that, whilst intuitively plausible, we cannot verify. Thomas Nagel (1974), for example, points out that although we can make intelligent and informed guesses at what it is like to experience the world as a bat does, we simply cannot share the inner life of a bat. We cannot experience bat-consciousness for all our attempts to think about what kind of world echo-location might present. Objections of this type are certainly worth considering when we wish to think about the extent to which human consciousness is markedly different from animal consciousness, and whether we can indeed identify a 'reflective threshold' that divides the two. However the crucial point that I wish to take from de Chardin's work remains intact – self-reflective consciousness enables the human being to work upon and transform their awareness of the world and themselves in a very profound way and, as I shall discuss later, this has enormous implications for the way that we relate to other human beings. It also opens up all sorts of interesting possibilities for inter-subjective consciousness that transcends more limited modes of self-awareness.

## **Self-Reflection and Self Knowledge**

From these two excerpts from *The Phenomenon of Man* we can begin to intimate some of the features of self-reflective inquiry. Primarily it is consciousness turned in upon itself so that the individual begins to get a sense of him or herself at the core of

their being (described alternatively as centre or depths). There is an important sense in which it is an internal process – marked by the ‘*activities of inner life*’. There is also the idea that the self which is to be found at the core has some sort of integrative and unifying quality which crystallises or ‘knits’, to use de Chardin’s term, impressions and experiences together.

There are of course further questions that we can and should ask in response to these observations. For example, how does one respond to the idea that the centre of being has an integrative quality when confronted with the ‘unconscious’ as posited by psychoanalysis or belief systems that view the integrated centre as something to be transcended or erased? Furthermore if self-knowledge is realisable does it have any intrinsic or instrumental value? If self-reflective inquiry is an internal process what importance do we accord the fact that as human beings we are social animals and self-reflection is invariably influenced by our relationships to, and communication with, other human beings?

Jopling (2000) addresses just these sorts of questions in his book ‘Self-knowledge and the Self’. He begins his study by providing what he refers to as a broad description of the sort of self-knowledge that answers to the Delphic maxim *Gnothi seauton* ‘Know thyself’ (the ancient Greek moral injunction);

“The self-knowledge that results from the process of reflective self-inquiry and reflective self-evaluation is ascribed to those who know with some acuity the shape and development of their moral personality, the direction their lives are taking, and the values that matter most to them; who have achieved a level of personal integrity through the adoption of a stance of self-criticism toward their immediate desires, beliefs, and volitions; and who have not accepted uncritically any conventional and ready-to-hand forms of self-understanding

as descriptive of the true nature of the self, but who have, by reasoning, choice, dialogue, or moral reflection, arrived at their own ways of making sense of themselves and their life histories.” (p. 2)

Jopling here articulates certain important features of the process of self-reflection, viz. an examination of one’s ‘moral personality’ (however we define this), critical reflection upon the circumstances of one’s existence and the future direction of one’s life. Crucially Jopling also communicates the importance of a certain degree of freedom in one’s rational-critical self-reflection – one must not unquestioningly accept ‘any conventional and ready to hand forms of self-understanding as descriptive of the true nature of the self’. It is important for the individual to arrive at ‘their own ways of making sense of themselves and their life histories.’ This is why, Jopling argues, self knowledge is not something that we have automatically, rather it is something to be worked at ‘it is an achievement and not a given’ (p. 2) Essentially this is so, notes Jopling, because:

“...it involves subjecting the various parts of the self – especially those desires, beliefs, traits, and emotions that are central to the self’s configuration – to the difficult work of self-inquiry and reflective self-evaluation; and because it involves subjecting conventional self-understandings, which are not themselves normally scrutinised, to self-criticism.” (p. 31)

It is the transformative potential latent within self-reflective inquiry and self-criticism that perhaps explains why the inward turn, or interior life, is widely regarded as so crucial to moral and spiritual development. Even the most cursory survey of a limited number of religious texts reveals the central importance attached to reflective self-inquiry as a mechanism for remoulding consciousness.



Teresa of Avilla (1515-1582), a Carmelite nun from Spain who wrote *Interior Castle*, one of the classic texts of Christian Mysticism, emphasises why she believes cultivating self-knowledge is so crucial to the spiritual journey. She writes:

“ It is no small pity, and should cause us no little shame, that, through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves, or know who we are. Would it not be a sign of great ignorance, my daughters, if a person were asked who [she] was, and could not say, and had no idea who [her] father or [her] mother was, or from what country [she] came? Though that is great stupidity, our own is incomparably greater if we make no attempt to discover what we are, and only know that we are living in these bodies...” (1989, p. 29)

Teresa uses such words as ‘ignorance’ ‘stupidity’ ‘shame’ and ‘pity’ to describe the failure to cultivate self-knowledge. In even stronger terms Plato’s Socrates states in the *Apology*, shortly before the jury condemns him to death:

“I say again that the greatest good of [human kind] is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that *the life which is unexamined is not worth living*.”

(Text available online: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>)

The point that Socrates makes in the *Apology* about the nature of wisdom is that it resides in knowing how little one knows. Without critical self-reflection and subjecting our beliefs and values to the rigorous scrutiny of self-criticism (so that we can determine the limits of our knowledge) human beings, according to Socrates, lack wisdom. Wisdom, on this account, is a self-awareness that is conscious of its own limits. I return to this point below when discussing self-reflection as the escape from egocentric consciousness and embracing a more tolerant and open attitude to the viewpoint of the other.

What is communicated in the assertions made by St Teresa and Socrates is that failure to engage in critical self-reflection results in ignorance and a life that is at best partial, at worst not worth living. And it should be noted, as Socrates does, that an inflated confidence in one's own intelligence and wisdom may be the very root of ignorance, he states:

“I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom that I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing, he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name as an illustration, as if he said, He, O men is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing” (Ibid.)

Searching into ‘myself’ (as well as into others, through dialogue) is, for Socrates, the philosopher’s mission, and it is a mission that is recognised in many other spiritual discourses as the essence of, and means to, the good life.

### ***Transcending ego consciousness***

The transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry is often seen to reside in the possibility of embracing a self-world view that recognises the limitations of self-centred modes of perception (egocentricity). Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan (1999), writing from a Sufi perspective, notes:

“Indeed, the secret of Sufism is to shift from the vantage point of our personal point of view to the Divine point of view. Very simply, our being is made up of two poles of consciousness: the individual, personal self and the Divine, higher self. It is at the pole of the personal dimension of consciousness that we experience constraint and limitation. While we may think that our

circumstances are the cause of frustration, the real source lies in our not being aware of our higher self. Thus, the goal in meditation is to reconnect our personal self to this transpersonal dimension of our being.” (p. 4)

What Inayat Khan means by divine, higher self is of course open to extensive debate but I quote this passage here to draw attention to the idea that many religious texts talk about the transformation of consciousness as a transcendence of, or liberation from, egocentricity. As he points out though, this does not necessarily mean the eradication of personal consciousness, but simply a recognition that the beliefs, values, emotions and desires that we hold to be representative of personhood are subject to continual change and a more stable mode of consciousness (wisdom) arises when we confront this transience. He states that we can picture consciousness:

“...as if it were a pendulum. At one end is the dimension of our being that is transient and evanescent, or continually changing and transforming through a process of evolution. At the other end of this pendulum is that part of consciousness that remains immortal and unchanged. Thus our whole being could be said to be a continuity in change” (Ibid. p. 4-5)

In Buddhism the notion of impermanence accords with the ideas expressed here and the recognition of impermanence is seen as tantamount to mental liberation – a freeing of the mind that occurs when the workings of the mind are properly conceived. Indeed the goal of Nirvana or Enlightenment is frequently alluded to as a ‘blowing out’ of the self-conscious mode of perception. Buddhists like Thich Nhat Hanh believe that the idea that there is a fixed and permanent ego-self, which is an absolute and central reality, or indeed a fixed and permanent object domain, is an aspect of consciousness that dissolves upon closer inspection:

“You are born, you grow up, and you change every day in terms of body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. [...]

Not only is the physical changing but also your mind is changing. This observation leads you to the insight that there is no permanent entity that you can call yourself [...]. Impermanence is the reality of things in the phenomenal world. This is the insight from both East and West. “No one can bathe twice in the same river” is a Western insight. While standing on a bridge, Confucius once said, “Flowing always like this day and night.” It is the same kind of insight. If everything is impermanent, there cannot be a permanent entity. This is the meaning of non-self. Non-self does not mean non-person or non-existing. Even though you are non-self, you continue to be a person with a body, with feelings, with perceptions, with mental formations, with consciousness. You continue to be a person, but a person without a separate self.” (1999, p. 19)

Here the Buddhist notion of co-dependent origination is useful – nothing exists (including one’s very own sense of self) in isolation or independently of a myriad other conditions and phenomena. In this sense the notion of a fixed and independent ego-self is a blinkered and restricted way of viewing the world. It is not difficult to contemplate co-dependent origination when one reflects on the symbiotic relationship that exists between human life and plant life. Plants need the carbon dioxide that we breathe out; we need the oxygen that they produce. If we apply a similar logic to human relationship and posit a symbiosis whereby our sense of self is constantly evolving and heavily influenced by the people that we meet and the environments in which we find ourselves then we become more receptive to alternative points of view. Far from entailing a homogenising of opinion, it requires a willingness to participate in dialogue and a recognition of the value of diverse opinions and beliefs. I return to

this point below when discussing the work of Buber and Bohm. I also explore it with reference to my own experiences in the autobiographical chapter.

### ***The fragmented Self***

In St Augustine's *Confessions* (397) we find an early and very brilliant account of one particular struggle to transform and transcend the limiting, personalised pole of consciousness. What St Augustine confesses to God represents a penetrating act of self-inquiry, self-evaluation and self-criticism beginning, like most existential explorations, with the explicit recognition of his own mortality 'But, dust and ashes though I am...' (p. 24). St Augustine traces what he felt to be a sinful life up until the age of thirty two (broaching sexual temptations, his penchant for the cruel sports of the arena, his fascination with the doctrines of Manicheism) when he had what he perceived as a spiritual revelation and embraced Christianity. His confessions, couched in theological language and replete with scriptural quotation as they are, essentially reflect St Augustine's attempts to explore his desires, beliefs, traits and emotions – his thoughts and feelings as he strives to relinquish the carnal or temporal pleasures of what he regards as his 'lower self' and embrace a spiritually oriented 'higher self'. Self-criticism, for St Augustine, was certainly a painful process:

"I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I mustered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me, bringing with it a great deluge of tears." (1961, p. 177)

When St Augustine subjected the contents of his self (the vast retinue of his thoughts, emotions, desires and beliefs that could conceivably be called his 'I') to severe scrutiny and self-criticism he discovered what he interpreted as God at the core of his being and thereby transcended the confines of the lower self. Self-transcendence was for St Augustine the goal of the spiritual quest:

“When at last I cling to you [God] with all my being, for me there will be no more sorrow, no more toil, then at last I shall be alive with true life, for my life will be wholly filled with you.” (Ibid. p. 232)

There is a sense in which St Augustine regards this as liberation – the end result of the inward trajectory is to reveal the inherent instability of those aspects of personhood, or self-hood which have hitherto caused unhappiness because of their restrictive and impermanent nature. Restrictive, in St Augustine’s case, meant the limiting of his consciousness to egotistic desires, beliefs, traits, emotions and habits– it was St Augustine’s perception of his self-centredness that caused him such anguish and existential insecurity. He could not root a lasting happiness in these transient aspects of his personhood.

Easwaran (1987) in his introduction to *The Dhammapada* (one of the central tracts in Buddhist scripture) notes a similar whittling away process involved in the activity of self-reflection and self-cognition. He places Buddhist views in the context of the philosophical speculations that were prevalent in India at the time. Referring to the *Upanishads*, a collection of texts that date from about 1,000 BC which can be regarded as guides for reflective self-inquiry, he notes;

“....the sages of the *Upanishads* took a different track from conventional science. They looked not at the world outside, but at human knowledge of the world outside. They sought invariants in the contents of consciousness and discarded everything impermanent as ultimately unreal; in the way that the sensations of a dream are seen to be unreal when one awakens. Their principle was *neti, neti atma*: “this is not the self; that is not the self.” They peeled away personality like an onion, layer by layer, and found nothing permanent in the mass of perceptions, thoughts, emotions, drives, and memories that we call ‘I’.

Yet when everything individual was stripped away, an intense awareness remained: consciousness itself. The sages called this ultimate ground of personality *atman*, the Self.” (p. 11-12)

Whether we regard the God that St Augustine found after peeling away the layers of his personality and the Self (with a capital S) that the Upanishadic sages found at the core of their being after a similar self-reflective process as one and the same is open to speculation. The point here is that both St Augustine and the sages of the Upanishads discovered in their self-reflective inquiry the solution to, or cure for, what William James (originally published 1902) refers to as a ‘divided self’ – a self alienated from itself, indeed James quotes St Augustine as a typical case of discordant personality and as having ‘...given an account of the trouble of having a divided self which has never been surpassed.’ (1985, p. 172). James argues that:

“...in all of us, however constituted, but to a degree the greater in proportion as we are intense and sensitive and subject to diversified temptations...does the normal evolution of character chiefly consist in the *straightening out and unifying of the inner self*. The higher and lower feelings, the useful and the erring impulses, begin by being a comparative chaos within us – they must end by forming a stable system of functions in right subordination.”

(Ibid, p. 170 my italics)

The important point for the development of my thesis is that if reflective self-inquiry is to be regarded as crucial for circumnavigating the chaos and confusion presented by the fragmented or divided self, then inhibiting critical self-evaluation and reflection is damaging to human beings. The straightening out or unifying of the inner self could be regarded as a process of liberation – freeing oneself from the confines of an existence that has perhaps been uncritically accepted and restricted by dogmatic

adherence to values, beliefs, emotions, desires, memories that have not been sufficiently scrutinised.

### ***Self-reflection and the unconscious***

In a significant sense, I think, one could argue that the focus of Jung's psychoanalytic investigations very much relates to this process of mental liberation – self-evaluation which is aimed at integrating the divided self. Jung uses the notion of self but the sense in which he sees it as fractured refers to the division between consciousness and unconsciousness. He points to:

“...the *self* in contradistinction to the *ego*, which is only the point of reference for consciousness, whereas the self comprises the totality of the psyche altogether, i.e. conscious and unconscious.”

(In Storr, 1983, p. 237)

Jung refers to a process he calls ‘individuation’ whereby the individual, in confronting the unconscious dimensions of their life, becomes whole or unified. As Storr argues in his introduction to the selected works, Jung perceived that:

“There was...within every individual, a striving toward unity in which divisions would be replaced by consistency, opposites equally balanced, consciousness in reciprocal relation with unconsciousness.”

(1983, p. 18)

Wholeness, or unity for Jung represented a return to what he regarded as the authentic centre of being which was not the ego (which simply represented, as we have seen, the centre of consciousness) but rather a shift towards:

“...the hypothetical point between conscious and unconscious. This new centre might be called the Self.”

(Ibid, p. 19)



For Jung coming to terms with the way that unconscious psychic forces impact upon the individual is crucial for the move towards unity or wholeness. For example he felt that we often labour under the false belief that we are free because we feel able to act upon our desires and beliefs, habits and impulses. However, if we probe this idea a little further we discover that we are often in bondage to such unconscious and instinctive drives, and therefore not free at all. He states:

“...we seldom find anybody who is not influenced and indeed dominated by desires, habits, impulses, prejudices, resentments, and every conceivable kind of complex. All these natural facts function exactly like an Olympus full of deities who want to be propitiated, served, feared, worshiped....Bondage and possession are synonymous. Always there is something in our psyche that takes possession and limits or suppresses our moral freedom. In order to hide this undeniable but exceedingly unpleasant fact from ourselves and at the same time to pay lip-service to freedom, we have got accustomed to saying apotropaically<sup>1</sup>, “I *have* such and such a desire or habit or feeling or resentment, instead of the more veracious “such and such a desire or habit or feeling or resentment *has* me.” The latter formulation would certainly rob us even of our illusion of freedom.” (1983, p. 246)

There is a sense in which Jung’s process of individuation is a spiritual quest analogous to the process of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by St Augustine and the sages of the Upanishads – in that all aim at a certain sense of liberation or detachment from a lower ‘restricted’ self towards a self that is more authentic because it is more aware. Desires, angers, passions, egotistic beliefs – these are the components of a person’s being which hold one in bondage and only through a reflective process of

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<sup>1</sup> Apotropaic - having the power to or purpose of averting evil

self-evaluation and self-criticism can these be transcended and the individual achieve any kind of freedom. In one of the classic works of Indian philosophy the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna says to Arjuna:

“When a [human being] surrenders all desires that come to the heart and by the grace of God finds the joy of God, then [their] soul has indeed found peace. [She] whose mind is untroubled by sorrows, and for pleasures [she] has no longings, beyond passion, and fear and anger, [she] is the sage of unwavering mind. Who everywhere is free from all ties, who neither rejoices nor sorrows if fortune is good or is ill, [hers] is a serene wisdom.”

(1962, p. 14)

I think that it is helpful to read this passage in light of the observations made above. Contained in it is not only a recognition that wisdom depends upon transcending the personal pole of consciousness but also the reference to going beyond pleasure, passion, fear and anger (being free from all ties) – fits in with the Jungian idea that confrontation with the Unconscious is crucial. The point is not that one rejects either sorrow or joy – to do this would be to falsify a crucial element of human existence. Rather one should seek to understand joy and sorrow from a transcendental perspective by not being so personally attached to them.

### **Self Reflection, Self Awareness and Liberation**

The foregoing discussion emphasises certain linking themes that are crucial for the development of this thesis.

- Firstly, self-reflection is identified as pivotal to the good life.

- Secondly, the goal of self-reflective inquiry is to transform a self-awareness that has been divided or fragmented (whether this rupture is conceived as a separation between the personal and the divine centre of consciousness (e.g. Christian or Islamic Mysticism), between the conscious-ego and the unconscious (e.g. Jung) or by the failure to recognise the transient nature of self or the impermanence of all phenomena (e.g. Buddhism/Hinduism).
- Thirdly, reconciliation of this division results in transcendence, liberation, wisdom and wholeness – all of which point to the possibility of a more authentic mode of existence. There are points of convergence between the Socratic wisdom that acknowledges its own limitations, the transcendental wisdom that results from abandoning attachment to the personal point of view and the Jungian wisdom that seeks to reconcile the conscious and unconscious aspects of being. All are united by emphasising freedom from limited modes of self-awareness and the possibility of authentic self-determination when the constraining ego is acknowledged.

So far the emphasis has been on describing the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry as an escape from restricted modes of self-awareness. A breaking free from the ‘shackles of illusion’ (Fromm, 1993) and a liberation from the domination imposed by the internal authority of the ego. This is the *intrinsic* value of self-reflective inquiry. I now wish to turn to the *instrumental* value of self-reflective inquiry – the possibilities that are opened up when we do not live exclusively from the personal centre of being.

## Avoiding Narcissism

One of the fundamental criticisms that can be levelled at the prioritising of self-reflective inquiry is the charge that it is a narcissistic endeavour. Erich Fromm notes:

“It might sound as if self-analysis increases the tendency for being occupied with oneself; i.e., that it is the very opposite to the aim of getting rid of one’s ego-boundedness.” (1993, p. 83)

It is certainly a point that warrants serious consideration. By looking so deeply at my ‘Self’ I risk obfuscating another crucial dimension of human existence, namely the fact that I share it with others. What is more, this shared existence extends beyond the human domain. I am part of a complex ecological system – which affects, and is affected by, me – not just my actions, but also the thoughts, emotions, beliefs and values that inform and are informed by those actions. Fromm argues, however, that self-reflection is so important precisely because it exposes the egotism that prevents us from extending the scope of our vision:

“Self-analysis becomes a kind of cleansing ritual, not because one is so concerned with one’s ego but because one wants to free oneself from egoism by analysing its roots.” (Ibid.)

This is certainly one approach to defending the charge of narcissism, another is to expand the notion of ‘Self’ by exploring the idea of inter-relationship. Fritjof Capra (2002) does precisely this in his book *The Hidden Connection*. He synthesises scientific insight with sociological and philosophical inquiry to develop a ‘new understanding of life’ that seeks to ‘integrate life’s biological, cognitive and social dimensions’ (p. xii) which he refers to as ‘deep ecology’. Capra observes a biological imperative that ‘no individual organism can exist in isolation’ (p. 5) and this he threads through his analysis of the way that cells work, consciousness operates and

social life is configured. It is not necessary to go into the details of Capra's argument, nor to understand his description of molecular or cellular activity, to appreciate the sentiment that informs his work which I wish to draw on here. The central point is that life is a complex network of symbiotic relationships, to focus on isolated units of analysis is a fragmentary approach that is at best partial, at worst, dangerously misguided. He states:

“The view that life, ultimately, is all about molecules is one that is often advanced by molecular biologists. It is important to realise, in my opinion, that this is a dangerously reductionist view. The new understanding of life is a systematic understanding, which means that it is based not only on the analysis of molecular structures, but *also on the analysis of patterns of relationships among these structures and of the specific processes underlying their formation.*” (p. 58, my italics)

Such an approach is illuminating when we consider some of what has been said before. It clearly sheds light on the Buddhist notion of co-dependent origination – the idea that no phenomena exist in isolation. Intriguingly, it also hints that the transcendence of ego-consciousness and the move towards a trans-personal ‘divine’ pole of consciousness might simply be life doing what it does naturally – embracing complex relationship.

The point that I am making here is that self-reflective inquiry, if it is to avoid the charge of narcissism, must take into consideration patterns of relationships with other human and non-human beings. Indeed Jung recognised the profound implications that psychic investigation (probing consciousness to explore unconsciousness) has for human relationship. For Jung the unconscious was not only the key to self-knowledge but also healthier patterns of human relationship. He posited the notion of a ‘shadow

self” to explore the negative side of personality. Chiefly the shadow consists of those aspects of personhood that are omitted from consciousness because they are deemed morally unacceptable. For example if I am told by parents, society or religion that to be greedy is wrong or evil – there is a strong pressure to either sublimate or repress instincts which lean towards greed. Jung argues, however, that these repressed tendencies can then be projected onto others in whom one sees precisely those characteristics which one is unwilling to acknowledge in oneself. This has an isolating effect because what we take to be self-awareness is a chimera:

“...it is not the conscious subject but the unconscious which does the projecting. Hence one meets with projections, one does not make them. The effect of projection is to isolate the subject from [their] own environment, since instead of a relation to it there is only an illusory one. Projections change the world into the replica of one’s unknown face.”

(In Storr, 1983, p. 92)

In a collection of essays entitled *The Undiscovered Self* (2002) Jung states:

“...nothing promotes understanding and *rapprochement* more than the mutual withdrawal of projections. This necessary corrective requires self-criticism, for one cannot just tell the other person to withdraw them. [They do] not recognise them for what they are, any more than one does oneself. We can recognise our prejudices and illusions only when, from a broader psychological knowledge of ourselves and others, we are prepared to doubt the absolute rightness of our assumptions...” (p. 72)

I believe Jung’s work provides a crucial bridge between an analysis of the nature and purpose of self-reflective inquiry and an exploration of participation that looks at patterns of relationship between human beings. Indeed it is my contention in this

thesis that one of the most significant aspects of the self-transformation that occurs through self-reflective inquiry has to do with the way that we relate to others – and this has enormous implications for participation. To develop this theme further I draw on the work of two thinkers in particular – Martin Buber, a Jewish theologian and philosopher who believed that ‘all real living was meeting’ (*I and Thou*, p. 25) and David Bohm, a theoretical physicist who applied his understanding of quantum mechanics to develop a philosophy of relationship and dialogue.

## **Section One, Part B: Buber, Bohm and Transforming the Fragmentary Self-World View**

### **Martin Buber**

In his seminal work *I and Thou* (1923), Buber outlines what can be regarded as an existentialist philosophy. He suggests that there are two modes of *being* – two diametrically opposed ways in which human beings can relate to, not only their fellow human beings, but also the entire cosmos. The opening paragraph of *I and Thou* reads:

“To [human beings] the world is twofold, in accordance with [their] twofold attitude. The attitude of [human beings] is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which [they] speak. The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words. The one primary word is the combination I-Thou, the other primary word is the combination I-It, wherein, without a change in the primary word, one of the words He and She can replace It. Hence the I of [human beings] is also twofold. For the I of the primary word I-Thou is a different I from that of the primary word I-It...Primary words do not signify things, but intimate relations.”

(2003, p. 15)

In essence what Buber is saying is that when we say 'I' we can say it in one of two ways which accordingly conditions the way that we are relating to the world – how we say 'I' constitutes our self-world viewpoint. For Buber, an I-It relationship to the world is one which perceives the world as a separate and distinct object domain from which the 'I' or self is wholly independent. In this type of relationship we hold ourselves apart from the world of 'other' and view it as an object – an 'IT' – to be appropriated, used and understood as we see fit. In an I-Thou relationship we enter into, what Buber refers to as, communion with the other. We do not deny the essential difference or separateness of the other but we enter into a relationship with the other with our 'whole being' – with a recognition that the other is not merely a 'nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities' (p. 21) but another 'whole being' with which we can achieve a degree of intimacy not possible when we regard the other as 'IT'.

It seems to me that the critical distinction between an I-It relationship and an I-Thou relationship is that we are very much locked into our own perceptual frame of reference when we think in exclusively I-It terms. The self is both the start and end point of our relationship to the world of other. *What do I think about the other? How does the other make me feel? What are the qualities of the other that I can discern?* With an I-Thou relationship we open up a dialogue of mutual relation – a space 'in-between' self and other that requires us to adopt a point of view outside our narrowly self-interested frame of reference. Dialogue is instrumental in establishing an I-Thou relationship – it requires a turning towards the other with ones whole being – whether reflecting on how a common event might appear from the standpoint of an other or accepting the other's particularity in a way that is not circumscribed by one's own prejudices. Buber states in *Between Man and Man* (originally published 1947):



“There is genuine dialogue – no matter whether spoken or silent – where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation...” (2002, p. 22)

The sentiments expressed in this assertion by Buber are very similar to the following extract from the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) which defines participation in relation to education and learning thus:

“Participation means learning alongside others and collaborating with them in shared learning experiences. It requires active engagement with learning and having a say in how education is experienced. *More deeply, it is about being recognised, accepted and valued for oneself.*” (p. 3 my italics)

There are a number of important points to take from this definition of participation. Participation is about shared experience and collaboration. It is about active engagement and valuing human diversity and individuality. But how do we reconcile this with the spiritual and philosophical quest to transcend the personal, individualised pole of consciousness? Buber’s answer is that we do not do away with what it is that makes an individual unique (their particularity) but rather we try to ensure that we avoid excluding others by being so attached to our own particularity that we fail to appreciate the particularity of others. Paul Tillich (originally published 1952) touches upon a definition of participation which tries to accommodate sameness and difference:

“...participation means: being a part of something from which one is, at the same time separated. Literally participation means “taking part” [...] participation is a partial identity and a partial non-identity. A part of a whole is

not identical with the whole to which it belongs. But the whole is what it is only with the part.” (2000, p. 88)

The I-Thou relationship is a partial identity and a partial non-identity – acceptance and valuing another’s particularity requires an understanding of the transience or impermanence of our own particularity. The things which make me an individual like no other – the distinctive combination of beliefs, values, heritage, emotions, skin colour, parents, history, genes, culture, gender and everything that make me singularly unique can only ever partially help me to identify with, or differentiate myself from, others. This is the beauty of the I-Thou relationship – it recognises that our own, and other’s particularity is fluid and impermanent. As Maalouf (2000) states:

“...When one sees one’s identity as made up of a number of allegiances, some linked to an ethnic past and others not, some linked to a religious tradition and others not; when one observes in oneself, in one’s origins and in the course one’s life has taken, a number of different confluences and contributions, of different mixtures and influences, some of them quite subtle or even incompatible with one another; then one enters into a different relationship both with other people and with one’s own ‘tribe’. It’s no longer just a question of ‘them’ and ‘us’: two armies in battle order preparing for the next confrontation, the next revenge match. From then on there are people on ‘our’ side with whom I ultimately have little in common, while on ‘their’ side there are some to whom I might feel very close.” (p. 26/7)

The I-It relationship is either pure identity or pure non-identity. It cannot be partial. I-It can only yield an ‘Us’ which is a complete identification with the other or it yields a ‘Them’ which is complete non-identification with the other. My race, religion, football team, or youth sub-culture versus their race, religion, football team or sub-

culture. The BNP Vs. Black Power; Christianity Vs. Islam Vs. Hinduism; Arsenal Vs Chelsea; Mod Vs. Rocker. The I-Thou mode of being is more genuinely participatory because it acknowledges the uniqueness of others by not clinging to the uniqueness of self. If the object of self-reflective inquiry is a transformation of consciousness whereby the person operates from a less self-centred mode of existence, participation can only occur if the individuality and uniqueness of the other is not denied.

## **David Bohm**

The work of David Bohm also helps us to move towards a deeper understanding of participation. The key to understanding Bohm's work is the distinction that he makes between fragmentation and wholeness which is a useful one for exploring, as he does, participation, dialogue and relationship. Essentially Bohm argues that mechanistic assumptions about the world (that it can be explained through a definite and general framework of laws, that it can be reduced to certain fundamental, independent and unchanging principles or elementary building blocks such as atoms or particles) have only a limited explanatory potential. Mechanism and reductionism represent, for Bohm, fragmentary epistemologies and result in an artificial separation between the human being (subject) and the world in which they live (object). Fragmentation has become, argues Bohm, a pervasive aspect of modern human existence. Individuals and groups of individuals (societies) have become excessively influenced by this fragmentary logic:

“...society as a whole has developed in such a way that it is broken up into separate nations and different religious, political, economic, racial groups etc. [The] natural environment has correspondingly been seen as an aggregate of separately existent parts, to be exploited by different groups of people. Similarly, each individual human being has been fragmented into a large number of separate and conflicting compartments, according to [their]

different desires, aims, ambitions, loyalties, psychological characteristics, etc., to such an extent that it is generally accepted that some degree of neurosis is inevitable, while many individuals going beyond the 'normal' limits of fragmentation are classified as paranoid, schizoid, psychotic, etc.”

(2002, p. 2)

For Bohm, it is not that fragmentation is irrelevant, only that it has limited validity in terms of our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live (a useful abstraction) and that it can have potentially damaging consequences if these limitations are not recognised. In Chapter Two I consider the ontological arguments upon which Bohm builds his philosophical theories. The point that I wish to concentrate on here is that Bohm, like Buber, argues that fragmentation, particularity, the notion of an autonomous, independent, unchanging self can only ever be a partial picture. The more one clings to the fragmentary approach, the more one believes that one can indeed divide and separate the world in this way, the more one actually experiences the world and oneself as autonomous and fixed. For Bohm (originally published 1980) there is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, a self-perpetuating feedback loop which operates here. He states:

“Being guided by a fragmentary self-world view, [one] then acts in such a way as to try to break [oneself] and the world up, so that all seems to correspond to [this] way of thinking. [One] thus obtains an apparent proof of the correctness of [this] fragmentary self-world view though, of course, [one] overlooks the fact that it is [oneself], acting according to [a] mode of thought, [which] has brought about the fragmentation that now seems to have an autonomous existence...”

(2002, p. 3)

This observation is neatly encapsulated in the opening line of the Dhammapada “Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think” (1987, p. 78). And Bohm, in common with the Buddhist epistemology on which this sentiment is based, argues that the antidote to a fragmentary self-world view is a shift in consciousness towards an appreciation of what he terms ‘undivided wholeness in flowing movement’ (2005, p. 14). It is this shift, I believe, which can help us to understand the notion of participation more deeply.

In Chapter Two I note Bohm’s distinction between the implicate and the explicate order which is the key to explaining what he means by undivided wholeness in flowing movement. Essentially the explicate order corresponds to the fragmentary self-world view and, arguably, is also very similar to what Buber refers to as an I-It mode of being. The implicate order, by analogy, is therefore more like adopting the I-Thou perspective and the focus is very much the extent to which the individual part is actually related to the totality. In the explicate order the world is regarded as consisting of elementary particles that are outside of each other, exist independently and interact mechanically. In the implicate order each part grows in the context of the whole and interacts organically. I believe it is this distinction that is pivotal to conceptualising participation. For example we can consider the participation of children who have been excluded from mainstream education. Regardless of whether they have been out of particular learning environments because they were working as bonded labourers or hived off into ‘special needs’ classes their participation is necessarily about more than simply placing them in mainstream learning environments. It requires an understanding of how these hitherto excluded children will ‘organically relate to the totality’. How will they respond to the curriculum that is being taught, the way in which it is being taught, their peers with whom they come

into contact, the physical learning environment, the values and beliefs espoused by the teachers and a host of other contextual factors?

Bohm's thoughts on dialogue and creativity are illuminating here but there is not the scope in this chapter to explore them in anything but very limited detail. Essentially the point that he makes is that fragmentation is a feature of thought based upon recourse to fixed memories and rigidly held assumptions. Existence, on the other hand, is more akin to Heraclitian flux – constantly flowing organic movement. The more rigidly we hold assumptions, the less receptive we are to the total flow and the less creatively we are able to participate in that flow. This kind of conceptual framework can help us to understand the part that prejudice plays in rigid Us-Them (I-It) distinctions and the ways in which participation can be enhanced by diminishing these rigidly held assumptions (I-Thou). Dialogue, for Bohm, is one way in which this is achieved:

“Dialogue is really aimed at going into the whole thought process and changing the way the thought process occurs collectively.”

(In Nichol, 2003, p. 305)

Through dialogue opportunities for collective thought are opened up because, under the right conditions, personal opinions, assumptions and ideas, can be subjected to scrutiny. In addition dialogue permits the exploration of shared meaning, as such it lies at the heart of healthy human relationship and is an important feature of wholeness (and participation in that whole). Indeed Bohm even points out that etymologically healthy (and holy) are based on the Anglo-Saxon word ‘hale’ meaning whole.

## **Participation and Transforming the Self-World Viewpoint**

In summary then I have tried to develop an understanding of participation based upon the ideas of two thinkers. Both Buber and Bohm would recognise how profoundly important critical self-reflection is to this endeavour. Firstly both thinkers examine the relationship between self and other by challenging the rigid Cartesian separation of subject and object. Secondly both recognise that genuine dialogue, communion or encounter (participation) with other human beings requires one to reduce the extent to which one is attached to the egocentric viewpoint. Neither thinker advocates abandoning the personal point of view only that it should not serve as the exclusive point of reference. These ideas help us to reflect more deeply on some of the dynamics of human relationship and offer pointers for exploring participation in terms of the ways in which we think about ourselves and interact with others.

## **SECTION TWO: Exploring Dalit Emancipation and Participation in Learning**

Thus far I have argued that self-reflective inquiry has both an intrinsic and instrumental value. Intrinsically it is crucial for engendering a sense of inner freedom or liberation by weakening attachment to the egocentric perspective. Instrumentally it is important for using this freedom to enter into less divisive patterns of human relationship (participation). In this section I argue that both of these features of self-reflective inquiry are instructive when we are looking at not only Dalit emancipation, but also Dalit participation in learning.

## **Self-Reflective Inquiry and Dalit emancipation**

Shah (2001) in his essay entitled *Dalit Movements and the Search for Identity* recognises that many Dalit activists believe that answering the question ‘who are we?’ is imperative. Liberation, it is argued, requires self-awareness and enhanced self-esteem will be the corollary of a more authentic identity. ‘Who are we?’ marks the reflective turn inwards, the point at which Dalit consciousness becomes self-evaluative and self-critical. It is my contention in this thesis that this represents the critical moment in the quest for Dalit liberation and self-determination.

### ***Reflecting on self...recognising oppression***

The very word Dalit (meaning broken, oppressed, crushed) marks a change in nomenclature (see Chapter Six) – a move away from caste-conscious terms denoting Untouchability and reflects determination to address a sense of self that is broken or, to borrow William James’ terminology ‘divided’. As Shah notes, the term Dalit:

“...refers to those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate way. There is, in the word itself, an inherent denial of pollution [...] and justified caste hierarchy.” (2001, p. 196)

In a sense, by acknowledging the oppressive nature of the caste system (that it breaks or crushes the individual who is an ‘outcaste’) a prescriptive value system that stifles critical self-reflection and prohibits self-determination is de-legitimised. The word ‘Dalit’ conveys the idea that a self defined by caste is inauthentic, fragmented and alienated. Massey (1997) states:

“Dalit is thus not a mere descriptive name or title, but an expression of hope for the recovery of a past identity. The struggle of these “outcastes” has given the term Dalit a positive meaning. The very realisation of themselves as Dalit, the very acceptance of the state of ‘Dalitness’, is the first step on the way



towards their transformation into full and liberated human beings.” (p. 3)

In the Chapter Five I discuss the general features of the caste system in more detail. The point that I wish to focus on here is that many people would argue that caste has a profound impact upon the shaping of Dalit consciousness and selfhood. The caste system not only regulates behaviour and practice according to ritual laws of purity and impurity (e.g. hereditary occupation, marriage, diet, worship etc) it also impacts upon those factors which are ‘central to the self’s configuration’ viz. beliefs, values, desires, emotions, resentments, habits etc.

Whilst Webster (2002) quite sensibly notes that it would be ‘...foolish to speak of the ‘Dalit’ psyche as if all Dalits were psychologically identical.’ (p. 138) there is certainly a recognition by academics as well as activists that caste cannot but impact upon the depth experience of self-hood. Whilst it is presumably difficult to establish causal links between the rubric of the caste system and the impact on consciousness in any strict scientific sense, common sense would dictate that inferior rights to primary resources like land and water, restrictions on the places one can live and visit, bondage and service to those who occupy a higher position in the caste hierarchy must indubitably have implications for the ways in which one thinks about oneself – one’s self image.

Mosse (1999) notes that Dalit identity is an identity characterised by subordination and servitude:

“Untouchables lack autonomous caste identities, that is identities apart from service. Dependence and service do not simply describe the social relations into which they, as social actors, enter. Dependence and service ideologically constitute Untouchable caste identity within village society.” (p. 68)

Dalit identities are relational identities in that they are ‘...defined and reproduced by relations of dependence and subordination’ (p. 69). Furthermore, as Webster points out if one is conditioned into thinking that one is impure and therefore that one should not touch, or be touched by, others there will be implications for the way one reflects upon oneself and the emotions which are either suppressed or expressed:

“Rural Dalit children learn at a very early age from the ways in which they and their parents are treated that they are polluted and inferior people. This has made them not only submissive and deferential, but also very angry. At the same time rural Dalits have been conditioned to feel both secure and dependent in their client-patron relationships.” (2002, p. 122)

Whilst I think one might criticise Webster for his somewhat generalised notion that Dalits are ‘secure and dependent’ in their client-patron relationships (see following discussion on Dalit autobiography) the point that I wish to pursue, made by both Mosse and Webster, is the characterisation of Dalit identity and existence in terms of subordination and dependency i.e. a fundamental lack of freedom. It is this lack of freedom or autonomy that I believe can be related to James’ notion of the divided self. If a human being is prevented from arriving at their own ways of making sense of themselves and their life histories (to paraphrase Jopling) and if their self-understanding is heavily influenced by a relationship based on servitude then one might argue that the self is fragmented or divided. Webster refers to the Dalit self as ‘deeply conflicted’ as a result of growing up at the bottom of a hierarchical society – a divided self - resulting from the imposition of an inferior status in societal relationships. Joshi, editor of *Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement* (1986) indicates just how important addressing this fractured sense of self is for Dalit emancipation:

“Dalit activism currently extends from small groups organizing agricultural labourers to the fragile beginnings of independent journalism, but underlying all of these tactics is the conviction that the most important struggles are those within the minds of both the oppressed and the oppressors. There are significant differences within the movement, but not over the need to break free of high-caste psychological domination and rethink self and society. The result is direct and immediate Dalit confrontation with the world of the mind and the institutions that feed the mind – the traditional priesthood, its modern academic reincarnation, the glossy high-caste/high-class world of the popular media. Concurrent with efforts to mobilize against overt oppression and exploitation there have been efforts to repossess culture and self, to work out independent Dalit values and standards through independent cultural institutions.” (p. 78)

The salient point here is that freedom is associated with independence from what is perceived as a mental slavery (psychological domination) and this is inextricably linked with the search for an authentic selfhood, marked by the repossession of a self that has been lost, denied or submerged as a result of caste oppression.

### ***Dalit Autobiography and Critical Self-Reflection***

The burgeoning field of Dalit literature, autobiography and poetry is clearly a manifestation of this search for authentic self-hood. Such creative endeavours provide penetrating insights into the nature and perception of selfhood as recorded by Dalits themselves, indeed it could be interpreted as a vital aspect of the Dalit turn inwards – critical self-reflection aimed at liberation and the recovery of a freer, more authentically human sense of self. As such Dalit literature also represents the subjection of emotions, desires, beliefs, resentments, values etc. to evaluation and

criticism. These are emotions which, hitherto, perhaps would have been uncritically accepted as a necessary corollary of being 'Untouchable'. Valmiki (2004) reflects in the preface to his autobiographical tale *Joothan: A Dalits life*:

“Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman and compassionless towards Dalits. I have harboured the desire to put the narrative of my pain into writing for a long time [...] putting these experiences on paper entailed all sorts of dangers. After a long period of procrastination, I started to write. Once again I had to relive all those memories, torments, neglects, admonitions. I suffered a deep mental anguish while writing this book. How terribly painful was this unravelling of my self, layer upon layer.” (p. vii-viii)

It might be pertinent at this point to recall St Augustine's similarly anguished self-reflective cry – the result of confessing his own 'narrative of pain':

“I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I mustered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me, bringing with it a great deluge of tears.” (1961, p. 177)

But, painful as the self-reflective process is, it is also cathartic and an important step forward in the struggle for emancipation since it represents the renunciation of a fragmented sense of self-in-subordinate relation and an articulation of self as whole and autonomous and prepared to challenge hegemonic oppression. Of central importance here is the promotion of 'Dalitness' with reference to a sense of strength in unity – the potential for a collective consciousness based upon the common experience of subjugation. This move is vital if the sub-caste distinctions which differentiate Dalit communities (see Chapter Six) are to be remedied. Dr Pantawane in

his contribution to *Untouchable! Voices from the Dalit Liberation Movement* hints at the importance of a new ‘cultural’ identity as well as remarking upon the significance of self-reflective inquiry:

“Dalitness is essentially a means towards achieving a sense of cultural identity. The inferiority complex based on ‘to be a Dalit’ has now disappeared. Now Dalitness is a source of confrontation. This change has its essence in the desire for justice for all mankind. In this sense, Dalitness is a matter of appreciating the potential of one’s total being. Thus individual, culture, social burden and Dalitness cannot be isolated. In this context the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ has a new cultural dignity, and in the writings of Dalits this is repeatedly reflected...For this new Dalit individual, social and cultural freedom have come because of his self-evaluation and self-identification.”

(In Joshi, 1986 p.79-80)

The autobiographical and literary ‘turn inwards’ also signifies an emphatic cry for Dalits to be judged on who they are and where they stand irrespective of their caste heritage. Jadhav (2003) in his autobiographical work *Outcaste: A Memoir* offers this impassioned plea:

“Why? Why can’t they let me be? Why can’t they accept me for what I am? For the millionth time I asked myself why they couldn’t judge me on where I stood? Why *did* they always have to judge me on the basis of my origins?”

(p. 207)

To be judged on the basis of where one stands relates to the issue of autonomy and freedom. It is a request to be judged honestly and independently of any external and fixed criteria of ascribed worth. The caste system constrains the development of particularity and the valuing of diversity because it seeks to define the parameters of

legitimate existence for specific sets of people according to principles of ritual purity and impurity. Individuality is therefore curtailed but as Sacks (2003) rightly points out:

“Our very dignity as persons is rooted in the fact that none of us – not even genetically identical twins – is exactly like any other. Therefore none of us is replaceable, substitutable, a mere instance of a type.” (p. 47)

According to the logic of the caste system, and the logic of identity badges more generally, there is a tendency to do damage to dignity by seeing individuals as ‘instances of a type’ and not whole and complex beings. Caste is premised on this sort of typological thinking – that one can determine the measure of a person by discovering their caste. Valmiki (2004) in his autobiography expresses consternation at the fact that ‘what is your caste?’ is one of the first questions he is asked on his travels alongside ‘what is your name and where are you from?’

Jadhav (2003) argues that the restoration of self-esteem requires a rejection of the internalised values of caste thinking – once again highlighting that critical self-reflection has a crucial role to play in Dalit emancipation:

“If others look down on me in their belief that my caste is low, it is their problem, not mine. I certainly don’t need to torment myself over it. I pity them, for they are the victims of their own obsolete prejudices. My mind was racing with a million different answers. Dignity, after all, rests in the mind and heart...and soul. I have to reclaim it not from the outside, but from within. And for that, I must cut off the albatross of the caste system from my soul, once and for all...” (p. 214)

It is this *reclaiming dignity from within* by rejecting caste-consciousness that connects very powerfully with the arguments put forward by Paulo Freire, which I explore below.

### ***Is Self-Reflection Really that Important for Dalits?***

There are of course some who would downplay the significance of critical self-reflection in the quest for Dalit liberation. Perhaps not arguing that it was meaningless but rather pointing out that a significant proportion of Dalits had more pressing concerns than existential inquiry, where the next meal was coming from for example. Shah (2001) suggests that class might bisect caste in such a way that the search for an authentic self is a luxury that the Dalit middle classes choose to pursue and not such a significant issue for poorer Dalits;

“For middle-class Dalits, the problems of the new identity of being native or indigenous Buddhists, Christians, Hindus or atheists [...] are more important than the problems of poverty and exploitation. They struggle through the literature and mass media, seminars and electoral politics. [...] But for the poor Dalits who are small and marginal farmers, landless agricultural labourers, artisans and coolies in urban unorganised sectors, poverty and exploitation are more important than the search for a new identity.” (p. 212)

This is certainly a point that merits serious consideration. Any Dalit who can write – whether it is autobiography, poetry or a contribution to the printed media – is, by definition, not as disadvantaged as the 58.5% of Dalits in rural India who, according to the 1991 census, were registered illiterate. However it is perhaps important to note that this should serve as an indicator for how critical enhancing the opportunities for Dalit participation in learning is, *not* as an excuse to abandon the search for an authentic self. As Mishra (2001) points out:

“Education is regarded as the most powerful instrument for emancipation and empowerment of Dalits or for that matter, any class of people lagging behind in the social hierarchy.” (p. 7)

Nambissan and Sedwal (2002) concur:

“One of the critical factors for economic betterment of Dalits in the post independent period has been formal education. Education has facilitated occupational diversification and mobility [...] for a small section of the Dalit population who are now in public sector jobs. This in turn has lessened their dependence on the higher castes, bringing with it some modicum of dignity. It has also been observed that the educated Dalits are less willing to accept the domination of the higher castes and have played an important role in the political and cultural assertion of Dalits witnessed in different parts of the country.” (p. 73)

The linking of education with dignity, unwillingness to accept domination as well as improvements in the employment prospects and material circumstances of some Dalits suggests that education and learning has an important role to play in Dalit emancipation. The question is what type of learning is most apposite?

### **Dalit Participation in Learning: Towards a Liberating Education**

In this final section of the chapter I reflect upon Dalit participation in learning by drawing upon the ideas of certain thinkers who place considerable emphasis on the value of human liberty and also returning to the ideas of Martin Buber. I specifically focus on the type of education that might facilitate the emancipation of an oppressed group or community. I am more concerned here with developing a concept of a



liberating education and do not specifically address the historical exclusion of Dalit children from schools – this I look at in more detail in the Chapter Five

### ***Education and the consciousness of oppression***

Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (originally published 1970) argues that the liberation of the oppressed requires the reflective participation of the oppressed themselves in the emancipative process and this entails coming to terms with the circumstances of their oppression:

“In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is a necessary but not sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action. Nor does the discovery by the oppressed that they exist in a dialectical relationship to the oppressor, as his antithesis – that without them the oppressor could not exist – in itself constitute liberation. The oppressed can overcome the contradiction in which they are caught only when this perception enlists them in the struggle to free themselves.” (1996, p. 31)

Freire conceptualises the reflective participation of the oppressed in their own liberation in terms of *praxis*, reflection that leads to transformative action. For him it occupies a central place in the emancipation of the oppressed in that it places the freedom to make informed decisions squarely in the hands of the oppressed themselves thereby re-capturing a fundamental aspect of their humanity which has been violated as a result of subjugation. Friere states:

“Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to

alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.” (Ibid, p. 66)

It is this process of objectivisation – the identification of Dalits as sub-human ‘things’ that results from caste-based thinking which, not only permits in-human atrocities to be perpetrated against Dalit communities and individuals, but also legitimises servitude by removing the freedom to make decisions and harbour aspirations that might improve their lives and livelihoods. According to Freire the oppressed are those individuals and groups that have been ‘determined from above’ – who in some significant sense have internalised the ‘consciousness’ of the oppressor and therefore can be seen as divided or dual beings - they are prohibited from authentic human being because they are not ‘beings for themselves’ but ‘beings for another’. Because of the caste system Dalits are not beings for themselves but beings for another and the term Dalit is an expression of this sentiment.

### ***Learning, freedom and critical reflection***

For Krishnamurti (1953) liberty (and therefore human dignity) entails not merely the absence of coercive social relationships it is just as importantly about freedom from the restrictive confines of ideologies and systematic and totalising doctrines and this is a significant point vis-à-vis the type of learning that might be said to facilitate Dalit emancipation:

“The following of authority is the denial of intelligence. To accept authority is to submit to domination, to subjugate oneself to an individual, to a group, or to an ideology, whether religious or political; and this subjugation of oneself to authority is the denial, not only of intelligence, but also of individual freedom. Compliance with a creed or a system of ideas is a self-protective reaction. The acceptance of authority may help us temporarily to cover up our difficulties

and problems; but to avoid a problem is to intensify it, and in the process, self-knowledge and freedom are abandoned.” (1992, p. 60)

It is interesting to note the similarity of sentiment between Krishnamurti’s assertion that following authority is the denial of intelligence and these words of Bertrand Russell’s (1926):

“The real world is more unknown than we like to think [...] All sorts of intellectual systems – Christianity, Socialism, Patriotism, etc. are ready, like orphan asylums, to give safety for servitude. A free mental life cannot be as warm and comfortable and sociable as a life enveloped in a creed: only a creed can give the feeling of a cosy fireside while the winter storms are raging without.” (p. 62)

In my thesis I argue that caste-based thinking inhibits the development of what Russell refers to as a free mental life by ‘imposing contours on the vanquished’ (Freire, p. 119). So too does an approach to learning and education that stifles the creative impulse. Again coercion and authority play a significant role in limiting the benefits of education and schooling and preventing adequate participation in the learning process.

What Russell and other libertarian thinkers object to is education that might in some sense be regarded as a type of intellectual slavery. Education that restricts the opportunity for individuals to critically reflect upon and challenge what is being taught is, on this account, neither edifying nor is it adequate for the full development of human potential.

### ***Problem Posing Versus Banking Education***

Perhaps the real importance of tapping the creative impulse is tied to the issue of freedom and participation in learning. It is difficult to see how an individual could be said to truly participate in the learning environment or process of learning if he or she is not permitted to critique and challenge, that is, given the freedom to explore an issue, subject or fact in ways that they find meaningful. The distinction that Freire draws between *problem posing* and *banking education* is illuminating here. In banking education students are viewed as empty receptacles to be filled with the knowledge that the teacher imparts. Knowledge is deposited in the learners in a way that is analogous to money that is deposited in a bank. This is a coercive and authoritarian approach to learning because the students have a passive role imposed on them – they are manipulated and adapted to the world – their creative powers are not stimulated as fully as they could be and this, for Freire, has implications for the liberation of oppressed groups if the education that they receive renders individuals so docile that they are unable to reflect upon the circumstances of their oppression.

Problem posing education is the antithesis of banking education and, argues Freire, it is requisite not only for the liberation of the oppressed but also the fulfilment of human potential. Knowledge is the outcome of a process of inquiry facilitated by communication and dialogue:

“Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” (1996, p. 53)

Critical reflection and transforming action upon the world (praxis) are the central features of problem-posing education – the world is presented and explored as a ‘problem’ to be chewed over by students not injected hypodermically into uncritical

minds. I think this is consonant with Russell's belief that the world is more unknown than we like to think and therefore cannot be confronted adequately through systematized doctrines or limited self-referential frames of analysis. In common with Freire, Chomsky (1972) believes that learning in the form of authoritarian indoctrination is unhealthy for the individual and detrimental to societal progress. He asserts:

“The radical reconstruction of society must search for new ways to liberate the creative impulse, not to establish new forms of authority.” (p. 47)

It is this freedom to reflect and act where students are ‘no longer docile listeners [but] critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher’ (Freire, 1996, p. 62) that is essential not only for effective participation in learning but also developing the rational-critical faculty in human beings which is pivotal to the good life according to the humanistic conception which takes the goal of education to be:

“To give a sense of the value of things other than domination, to help create wise citizens of a free community, to encourage a combination of citizenship with liberty, individual creativeness, which means that we regard a child as a gardener regards a young tree, as something with an intrinsic nature which will develop into an admirable form given proper soil and air and light.”

(Russell, quoted in Chomsky 2003, p.26).

In this thesis I shall link the coercion and authoritarianism of the caste system and the coercion and authoritarianism of education that treats human beings as vessels to be filled rather than trees to be nurtured. In both instances human beings are coerced into a mode of being that is inauthentic because it is not adequately self-determined. As Freire points out men and women are ‘beings in the process of becoming [...]’

unfinished and uncompleted beings' (1996, p. 65). In a similar vein Maalouf (2000) also notes that identities are not fixed and rigid but open and fluid.

Both the caste system and banking-type education are detrimental to the free expression of selfhood because they serve to mould the shape of human beings rather than providing them with the necessary space to create themselves. And as John Stuart Mill (originally published 1859) points out in *On Liberty*:

“It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation.” (1985, p. 127)

## **Freedom and Responsibility**

In the quote above Mill notes the limits that are to be placed on freedom and individuality – that they are to be circumscribed by the rights and interests of others. This is a profoundly significant point and one which has implications not only for the way that we conceptualise freedom but also the manner in which we explore the notions of critical self-reflection and participation. Can we reconcile individual freedoms and collective responsibilities? If learning environments need to be permissive enough to facilitate critical self-reflection and self-determination what it to stop them from becoming governed by self-interested thought and activity?

Here we might return to Buber's work. If the learning environment is structured in such a way as to enable individuals to consider a more expansive notion of 'self' – self-in-relation-to-other (I-Thou) as opposed to self-in-opposition-to-other (I-It) – then self-determination is not constrained by considering the needs and desires of others. Rather it is governed by the principle that subjectivity must be orientated towards an

acceptance of shared being. Buber's distinction between personhood and individuality is interesting here:

“The person becomes conscious of [herself] as sharing in being, as co-existing, and thus as being. Individuality becomes conscious of itself as being such-and-such and nothing else. The person says ‘I am,’ the individual says, ‘I am such-and-such’. ‘Know thyself,’ means for the person ‘know thyself to have being,’ for the individual it means ‘know thy particular kind of being.’ Individuality in differentiating itself from others is rendered remote from true being. We do not mean by this that the person in any way ‘gives up’ [her] special being, [her] being different – only that this being is not [her] observation point, but simply there, the necessary and significant conception of being. Individuality, on the other hand, revels in its special being, or rather, mostly in the fiction of its special being which it has made up for itself.”

(2003, p. 86/7)

Freedom from domination and coercion, freedom to escape modes of being that have been insufficiently self-determined (either through an oppressive stratification system like caste, an authoritarian ego or a constraining education) is, for Buber, not the goal. Rather, he sees freedom as fertile ground for recognising shared being (see Chapter Eight). Tagore makes the same point:

“True freedom lies not in throwing off those bonds which tie us to our fellows, but in the realisation of a truth of relationship where in we have no need to abide as aliens.”

(1961, p. 87)

Buber refers to such relation as ‘communion’ (2002, p. 107) but perhaps we could term it participation without obscuring what he is saying.

## **Closing Remarks**

In this chapter I have argued that one of the crucial ways in which self-reflective inquiry can be said to be transformative is the sense of freedom or liberation that it engenders. This can be alternatively described as a freedom from excessive attachment to egocentric perspectives or freedom from the constraining influence of the unconscious. I have then built upon these ideas by using the work of Buber and Bohm to think about the instrumental value of self-reflective inquiry. In particular I have noted certain ways in which we can deepen our understanding of participation by considering how self-reflective inquiry, through diminishing the hold of egocentric assumptions, can facilitate dialogue and communion with others. In the closing section of this chapter I link these two related ideas with an examination of Dalit emancipation and participation in learning. Firstly by looking at the ways in which Dalit's have sought to liberate themselves through the process of critical self-reflection and secondly by considering what an education that aims at the liberation of oppressed groups might look like.



## **Chapter Four: Jihad...the Self-Reflective Journey of an Anglo-Other - from England to India and Back Again**

*“The apparent paradox of spiritual experience is the lesson that the constant effort, the jihad, that we make in order to purify, control, and liberate our heart is, in the end, a reconciliation with the deepest level of our being (al-fitra) [...] there where our conscience weds our being and gives in to peace (salam). The peace of recognition, the peace of submission (salam al-islam), is deep down a liberation.”*

(Ramadan, 2004, p vii)

This chapter paints a number of autobiographical pictures in an attempt to convey something of my own self-reflective journey. I reflect upon these personal experiences (from fleeting encounters to more substantial episodes) for a variety of reasons (outlined in Chapter Two). However, perhaps the most salient is to deepen my understanding of the extent to which the ‘journey inwards’ can have a liberating effect upon one’s sense of self by forcing one to scrutinise beliefs and values, pre-conceptions and prejudices thereby challenging certain ‘taken for granted’ frames of reference. I have thought about Dalit emancipation in an analogous way – transforming the consciousness of caste depends upon scrutinising the beliefs and values, pre-conceptions and prejudices (in the minds of Dalits and non-Dalits).

Reviewing many of the episodes has also enabled me to deepen my understanding of participation. I not only reflect upon barriers to, and opportunities for, participation in formal learning but also more generally in terms of the experience of belonging to, or marginalisation from, wider social and cultural contexts. Indeed it is the notion of

‘belonging’ that serves as an important motif in this chapter as I trace the literal and metaphorical journey that my PhD has been a part of.

In an important sense my research is inextricably linked to a larger quest for self-discovery; a search for unity or wholeness in the face of fragmented being. As someone with a mixed heritage (English mother and Indian born-Pakistani father) who grew up in a small rural community in Suffolk, I was keen to use my thesis and trips to India as vehicles for deepening my knowledge of an unexamined part of me (my ‘Asian’ self). This search for ‘an original unity’ or a more authentic mode of self-awareness can be read as a metaphor for the spiritual journey that I have also embarked upon. The more my journey forced me to confront (sometimes very uncomfortably) my pre-conceptions about who I was the more value I saw in an I-Thou mode of being in the world. ‘Original unity’ is not something that one can achieve in isolation or separation from the world of others; it requires encounter, dialogue, and communion. In short it requires participation with others. As such these autobiographical reflections have helped me to explore Dalit emancipation and participation in learning precisely because they suggest a connection between the transformation of consciousness and the development of more cohesive patterns of human relationship.

## **Part One: Jihad – the Struggle Within and Transforming Consciousness**

With some trepidation I entitle this chapter Jihad. I do so for a number of reasons relevant to my autobiographical reflections and the wider themes of this thesis. Jihad

refers to a striving or ‘constant effort’ vis-à-vis spiritual endeavour. Although the term is often narrowly conceived as religious warfare and has been seized upon by those who wish to portray Islam as a religion that sanctions violence, Jihad has a far deeper significance relating to the critically self-reflective inward turn that is so crucial for spiritual progress. For this reason clear-sighted thinkers (both Muslim and non-Muslim) tend to define the dualistic nature of Jihad and differentiate between the internal and external dimensions. Akbar Ahmed (2003) asks the question:

“Among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, how many know that the notion of the greater Jihad, commonly misunderstood as an aggressive act of religious war in the West, and which derives from the word to strive, was explained by the prophet as the attempt to control our own base instincts and work toward a better, more harmonious world? The lesser Jihad is to battle physically for Islam; that too only as a defensive action against tyranny and injustice.”

(p. 157)

Similarly Karen Armstrong (2003) defines Jihad thus:

“Jihad: struggle, effort. This is the primary meaning of the term as used in the Quran, which refers to an internal effort to reform bad habits in the Islamic community or within the individual Muslim. The term is also used more specifically to denote a war waged in the service of religion.”

(p. 173)

In both statements the internal dimension of Jihad is regarded as the most significant one and it is in this sense that I employ the term to characterise the type of inward reflection that is generative of this chapter (the ‘constant effort’ to comprehend the self – the sense in which St Augustine might have understood his Confessions). By

adopting a stance of self-criticism to my conventional understandings (my immediate desires, beliefs, thoughts, emotions and volitions) I explore what might be regarded as 'base' instincts because they have not been subjected to sufficient scrutiny hitherto.

I also use the term in a more symbolic sense. As noted above, one of the reasons that I chose to undertake fieldwork in India was to explore an unexamined aspect of my self or heritage. Many of the significant events and ideas that mark the political, cultural and religious histories of the Indian sub-continent (including Pakistan) were, to me 'an area of darkness' (Naipaul, 1964). Somewhat naively I believed that because my father was born in Bangalore before the partition of India I could smooth over a host of schisms (including the deep-seated tensions that can arise between Hindu and Muslim). I ignored the anguished look in my father's eye when I proudly proclaimed India, as much as Pakistan, an aspect of my heritage and therefore the country where I wanted to do my fieldwork. However on every step of my self-reflective journey as I have travelled between two countries that have played a significant part in my being, I have been forced to confront an uneasy and ambiguous relationship with Islam.

Global events and highly personal episodes have caused me to scrutinise my sense of self in relation to a wider Islamic community. My own pre-conceptions were radically challenged by the perception of others as it slowly dawned on me that I cannot simply ignore my 'Muslim roots' irrespective of whether I pray at the appointed hour, eat the 'traditionally' British roast pork dish that my mother cooks from time to time, or have spent a significant amount of time, like many people from my home town of Beccles, ensconced in the local pub. In an important way my relationship to my Islamic heritage has had a crucial role to play in the communities and societies which I feel I

belong to, and participate in, and reflecting on this has enabled me to move to a deeper appreciation of participation in general. I therefore use the term Jihad symbolically to pay lip service to the fact that my internal reflections have increasingly been marked by having to come to terms with a Muslim heritage – something which as a child meant no more than the super-egoic commandment that dad would be unhappy with us if we ever drank alcohol. Interestingly, as I write it dawns on me that I have had an uneasy relationship with alcohol and in a very significant sense it has been a personal Jihad – an effort to come to terms with a very base (on one level), but very strong desire (instinct?) to obliterate my normal state of consciousness. On another level it might be interpreted as the obverse aspect (the ‘shadow’ side to coin a Jungian term) of an almost obsessive attempt to obliterate normal consciousness through spiritual reflection.

In a sense then, by re-appropriating the term Jihad and using it in its primary (internally oriented) sense I am opening up a dialogue with a significant aspect of my identity and sense of self. But increasingly significant as it is, it is not the sum total of my being. In this thesis I make the point that to be judged by others, or to reflect upon oneself, in terms of single or fixed elements of one’s identity is anathema to the idea that human beings are whole and complex creatures and therefore alien to the spirit of inclusion and participation in learning (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). This has resonance whether we are talking about the inclusion of children perceived as having innate learning difficulties or children who, owing to an accident of birth, are deemed Untouchable.

My autobiographical reflections attempt to show that notions such as identity and self are complex – that we are in a state of unfreedom or bondage if we restrict our self-understandings to single or fixed points of reference (I am white, I am Muslim, I am a Dalit, I am disabled). This indubitably has implications for the way that we conceptualise participation and barriers to learning because it is critical to realise that aspects of an individual's identity and sense of self shift according to the context in which they find themselves and therefore a one-size-fits-all approach to the inclusion of marginalised children in mainstream educational settings is inadequate because it does not sufficiently acknowledge the interaction between complex selves and complex environments. As Booth and Ainscow (2002) note:

“...barriers to learning and participation can exist in the nature of the setting or arise through an interaction between students and their contexts: the people, policies, institutions, cultures, and social and economic circumstances that affect their lives ”. (p. 6)

In this chapter I hope to provide an illustration of how my shifting sense of self and consequent experience of participation in (or indeed exclusion from) particular contexts is highly complex and to attempt to understand or explore participation by trying to locate fixed and stable elements of this sense of self would be disingenuous because selfhood is more malleable. It is my contention in this thesis that realising one's fluid sense of self is tantamount to liberation from the bondage and the alienation which arises as a result of holding to a dogmatically and rigidly defined notion of self.

The historical juncture at which Islam finds itself today is such that many Muslims are having to strenuously reassess their own relationship to their faith. This, at times, is a painful self-reflective endeavour given the all-too-simplistic demonisation of their faith by significant numbers (Ramadan, 2004; Ahmed, 2003). It is in this spirit that I offer my autobiographical reflections, as an individual of mixed race and uncertain religious heritage living in the post 9/11 western/northern world. It would be possible to cite a range of writers that have eloquently explored the politics of identity in an increasingly 'globalised' age but, true to the intimacy and self-revelatory quality of the autobiographical method (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) I choose to quote a poem written by my brother which personally speaks more immediately to me about the struggle (Jihad) in which I am engaged to explore my highly fluid sense of self.

### Paki in the Middle

*I watch as Boeing meets building, twin towers reduced to rubble,  
And see the hatred in their hearts, they call me to Jihad;  
"Allah calls upon you, Child of the East,  
Come shed the blood of Infidels, our martyr, semtex-clad!"  
I see a nation ripped asunder, the Arab people blown apart,  
By the bombs of truth and justice, freedom's flag unfurled;  
"Liberty calls upon you, Child of the West,  
Come kill for democracy, let oil drown the world!"  
And while both sides hold their heroes, their honoured fallen dead,  
I play piggy in the middle, as the bombs fly overhead.  
  
Upon what battlefield can it be, that civilisations clash?*

*Not Washington or Fallujah, nor New York or Baghdad;  
But the blood within my body, there a war is fought,  
Come East, come West, my heart hangs heavy, for a world turned mad.  
And I shout from the highest rooftops, to the streets of London town,  
For with their bitter hatreds, both sides have it wrong;  
But when they will not listen, to a call for peace and change,  
What for the blood within me, where do I belong?  
Now nothing is black, nothing is white, all runs, it seems, to red,  
While I play piggy in the middle, as the bombs fly overhead,  
Just a Paki in the middle, as my people's blood is shed.*

By Salman Shaheen

### **Growing up in Beccles as an ‘Anglo-Other’**

*What for the blood within me, where do I belong?*

When filling in the ethnic disclosure section of any official form I have always felt constrained by the limited and limiting categories that are offered which do not reflect my own ambiguous sense of self. Such forms have, in a sense, forced me to determine who I was and where I belonged with reference to the dual heritage bequeathed to me by my parents. In the past I have reflected simplistically. My mother is white and was born in England, my father is brown and was born in India but moved to Pakistan after the partition of the country in 1947. I could therefore tick Anglo-Asian, Anglo-Pakistani, Anglo-Indian (at a push) or the delightfully unspecified, but equally rigid Anglo-Other, Asian-Other or Pakistani-Other. Ticking White-English was never an option despite the fact that one of my earliest memories as a child is looking in the



mirror and saying to myself ‘I feel white why don’t I look it.’ Whichever box I ticked, however, left me with the uneasy feeling that the excessive simplicity and rigidity of the categories did violence to a somewhat more complex, uncertain and fluid sense of self. Crucially, such rigid categories of self-definition were prison-like in that they restricted a freer and more nuanced self.

Although I was born In Coventry in 1975, I have spent the majority of my life in East Anglia. My parents moved to the small market town of Beccles in Suffolk when I was one and a half years old. Nearly thirty years ago the town, my mother recalls, was conspicuously white, lacking those ubiquitous bastions of ethnic diversity – the kebab house, and the Chinese and Indian restaurants, which most market towns in the UK now seem to have. She told me stories about pushing my sister and I around Beccles soon after we had moved and being stopped by strangers who remarked ‘what nice children, are they adopted?’ Presumably the idea that my mother might have a foreign/brown/other husband was too remote a possibility to entertain.

An early childhood recollection underscores this lack of clarity I felt regarding my ‘roots’ even though I was born in the United Kingdom. If nation and culture are more nebulous concepts than some nationalists would have us believe, one’s sense of self in relation to the experience of belonging is even more amorphous. When I was still very young, no older than five or six, I remember walking along the street in Great Yarmouth - I was some distance ahead of my mother. An older lad walking in the opposite direction spat with considerable venom ‘Fucking Paki’ at me and continued past. I recall that I did not feel upset for myself. After all the term Paki meant very little to me. It was probably one of the first times that I had heard the word and it was

presumably only the hostility in the lad's voice that gave away that it was a term of abuse. However I do remember feeling acutely concerned that my mother might have been upset by the comment. It transpired that there had been enough distance between my mother and myself for her not to have heard, and presumably for the lad not to have realised that she was my mother. It is however the symbolic distance between myself and my dual heritage that strikes me most clearly as I reflect now upon this episode. Visually speaking it was not obvious to the lad that I was my mother's child and so skin colour demarcates a significant gap between myself and the country and culture my mother was born into. And yet, since the label 'Paki' had meant so little to me because it was not anchored in any meaningful frame of reference, I see that there is also an important gap between myself and the country and culture that my father was born into. Ironically Pakistan means land of the pure and Paki, therefore, means pure. I must confess however – given the diversity of my ethnic composition, purity is the one thing that I cannot lay claim to.

As I reflect I realise that from an early age I have never experienced a strong sense of belonging to any particular community, country or culture. Perhaps this is in large part due to the fact that my father and mother had allowed us considerable freedom to express and explore ourselves as individuals whilst we were growing up. I certainly never felt that I was moulded into a fixed and clearly defined shape by my parents or that I was a concrete product of any one particular culture, heritage or religion. Indeed as children we had an interesting pastiche of diverse cultural influences in our upbringing. Regrettably, I was not taught Urdu (the lingua franca of Pakistan) or any other sub-continental language. Expedience presumably dictated that I learnt only the language of the country I grew up in (English). Interestingly however, given the

colonial legacy, English served as the most useful language to travel around linguistically diverse India with.

I was not forced into adopting any religious beliefs or cultural traditions but was encouraged by both parents to adopt an attitude of openness and tolerance to diverse beliefs and practices. My mother, although raised in a (somewhat unorthodox) Christian household (vegetarian conscientious objectors) flirted with the 19th Century Persian Bahai religion (an offshoot of Islam) before declaring herself atheist/humanist whilst my father continues to refer to himself as Muslim by psyche. The spiritual framework within which he reflects is broadly Islamic but it is not dogmatically so. It is this family legacy of open mindedness and tolerance that, I believe, has had a significant impact upon my belief in the value of freedom and respect for diversity.

Growing up I ate a lot of rice and curry (well before 'Chicken Tikka' was celebrated as a national dish) because my dad cooked a lot but then I also ate roast dinners and full English breakfasts. I celebrated Christmas in a deeply un-religious but not entirely un-traditional way. Mostly we ate turkey but there were times when dad prepared more exotic foods (as well as granny's mandatory nut roast), either way it didn't matter as long as we got to unwrap our presents which our parents had put underneath the tree and, whilst we still believed in Father Christmas, in our stockings. I had many friends at the local comprehensive schools that I attended and therefore do not recall feeling detached from the local community although I did have to endure the odd 'Paki' comment. I wore similar clothes to my classmates and yearned for the peculiar acceptance that issued from the brand of trainer one sported. I listened to the same music; swam and played cricket for the local town and practiced karate at the local

club. I watched the same films, visited the same pubs and clubs and, true to my Suffolk roots, got off with the same girls that my friends did.

I visited Pakistan once in 1987 however, I thought then, that there was very little about me that spoke of my Muslim/Pakistani/Asian background. Unlike many other members of 'non-indigenous' communities we did not take regular trips to the 'homeland' and it was not impressed upon us that we needed to 'keep in touch with our roots'. Actually notions such as 'roots' and 'homeland' are perhaps less meaningful to a child of mixed race than they are to members of a diaspora. Perhaps it was in large part because I was not raised as a 'strange talking, bizarrely clothed other/outsider' that I was able to integrate with the local community to the extent that I did.

If I did not feel any affiliation with a broader Islamic community or Pakistani diaspora, I could not say that I conformed to the definitional criteria of a Suffolk local either which requires one's family to have lived in the county for a significant number of generations. And although it would be simplistic to argue that my skin colour created an unbridgeable divide between myself and the conspicuously white community in rural Suffolk in which I grew up, it would be equally simplistic to say that, given all the things that I shared with other members of the local community, I was an 'insider'. Paradoxically I have come to realise this quite clearly when I have been most accepted by locals. For example, when a very dear friend of mine (who certainly did qualify as a Suffolk local) offered me a heartfelt statement of acceptance some years before she died when she commented 'you aren't like the rest of 'em, you are one of us'. Or, when I was accepted as a crewmember by colleagues I worked

with whilst I was a night cleaning operative at a local chicken factory, by being given the nickname ‘Sanjay’. It was a statement of affirmation because, given the unpleasant nature of the job most people who turned up did not last long and the regular team members did not bother talking to you during your first few days because the chances were that you wouldn’t stay. You knew that you had been accepted when you were given a nick name – ironically mine happened to be the name of the only Asian character at the time in the television soap Eastenders, thereby underscoring my essential ‘not-quite-like-themness’. ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ have never been particularly meaningful categories for me precisely because it has never been particularly clear to me which side of the binary opposite divide I fall.

Perhaps such episodes might help to explain my almost instant attraction to the existential philosophy of Martin Buber which advocates a mode of being in the world such that authentic self understanding has more to do with relationship (the meeting of the I with the Thou) than narrowly egotistic perceptions of selfhood.

My consciousness of self changes, evolves and shifts according to the particular environment (the cultural context or country in which I find myself or the people who I am with). In this crucial sense my very being is governed by relationship and this, I argue in this thesis, has implications for our conceptualisation of participation in learning. In these autobiographical tales I hope to demonstrate that I am more or less clearly defined by particular notions of self and identity according to the context I am in. For example, below I reveal an episode where my perceived Muslim status meant far more to one man in India than it had ever done to me prior to my meeting him. But let me rewind further for the moment.

## **Part Two: Reflecting on Participation and Belonging**

### **A Very Early Memory of Schooling...**

Some of my earliest vivid memories are from my time at a nursery group in Beccles, which catered for children between the ages of three and five. I remember two individuals from the group in particular, both have cropped up in my life at various times and both have had considerable impact on my thinking and actions on more than one occasion. In terms of outcome they represent bipolar opposites on the educational success/failure continuum. The first, Susan, was quite a shy but obviously very bright girl. She rarely received anything less than glowing praise from her teachers. Susan and I have attended the same educational institutions throughout our lives (both of us went to the same schools in Beccles, we were in the same year in the same school house, we even attended the same college at Cambridge and both graduated with First class honours in 1998).

The other person is a boy called Michael. Mickey, as I was to know him later, gave me my first cigarette and purloined my first can of beer on a school youth hostelling trip to Germany at the age of thirteen. I remember him being boisterous but likeable – he definitely had a spark about him, he was sharp – certainly not unintelligent but always in trouble with the teachers. His father was a pilot and never seemed to be around much (they may have been divorced) and his mother, it appeared, was overly indulgent towards Michael – she was never entirely in control.

I remember two incidents very clearly, both of which took place at the nursery group. On one occasion the class was sitting down for our afternoon milk (the Conservative Party's decision, under the guidance of Margaret Thatcher, to do away with this aspect of our schooling, I am sure, played every bit as profound a part in determining my political allegiances in later life as did other more globally significant events like the Falklands war). Susan, for some reason, had managed to spill her milk all over the desk and floor and was, what seemed to me at the time and still does, reprimanded disproportionately to the gravity of her offence. This event has fixed in my mind perhaps because it is the only time, in all my years of education with Susan, that I can recall when she was ever in trouble with the authorities – otherwise she was a model pupil. Michael on the other hand was always in trouble – the first time, in my memory at least, is a particularly painful childhood recollection of mine. It was home time – my mother had just arrived to collect me and just as we were about to leave Michael picked up a wooden brick and threw it at me – it hit me square in the eye and I am pretty sure I burst into floods of tears. I remember my mother being annoyed and making some sort of comment about how that boy would 'end up in jail'. Michael was reprimanded and, in this instance, I probably didn't think it unbecoming his crime.

Neither of these instances are particularly dramatic or uncommon – they are, I am sure, replicated daily in nursery schools up and down the country. Children, the world over, are mischievous and get in trouble at school. Both children in this autobiographical tale were bright infants. At the tender age of three or four both had the potential to achieve great things – educationally and otherwise. Susan, in-fact, went on to do precisely this – she recently completed her doctoral research at Cambridge, and is a recognised world authority on rat embryo immunology. Michael,

having been expelled from school before his GCSEs was killed in a motorbike accident following his release from prison after serving a seven-year sentence for an attempted armed robbery to feed his heroin addiction.

There are no simple answers, no mono-causal explanations for why Michael was marginalized and eventually excluded from school and, through imprisonment, society, whilst Susan became an archetypal success story. As the earlier quote from Booth suggests there will have been a complex interaction between the learners cited here (Susan and Michael) and their contexts (their family lives, teacher and peer group expectations, self image etc) some of which will be peculiar to their particular lives, some of which may be more generalisable.

In some way, perhaps on an unconscious level, these earliest childhood memories have contributed to my interest in what it is that allows some pupils to achieve in education whilst others are deemed failures and still others don't even enter into the equation. This for me is the crux of the inclusion/exclusion debate and, I suspect what it is that prompts Booth and Ainscow (1998) to comment:

“...inclusion or exclusion are as much about participation and marginalisation in relation to race, class, gender, sexuality, poverty and unemployment as they are about traditional special educational concerns with students categorised as low in attainment, disabled or deviant in behaviour.” (p. 2)

I think what really interests me is why it is that some people are excluded, marginalized or disadvantaged period – whether in an educational context or wider social environments. This feeling of indignation at injustice and inequity was instilled



in me at an early age and has certainly contributed to my research focus. Of course there are varying levels of exclusion and different gradations of marginalisation. The fact that I was not asked to join exclusive social societies at Cambridge because I did not attend the right school is exclusion of sorts (albeit one that did not trouble me in the slightest) at the opposite end of the spectrum there are children in Tamil Nadu who are not in school because they are working as bonded labourers in silk looms or child soldiers in Somalia who are learning to kill not read and write – far more troubling on a human level. Accordingly our notion of exclusion will be contextual (dependent upon a host of socio-economic and cultural specifics). It strikes me that a sensible start to understanding (and addressing) exclusion and marginalisation is to explore the symbiotic notion of ‘inclusion’ by asking ourselves what sort of educational opportunities/learning contexts do we want our children to be included in. In this thesis I explore learning environments which are not schools precisely because this question interests me.

## **Mapping an Alternative Path to my Research...Exploring ‘Other’**

### **Parts of Me.**

A more straightforward, but no less significant, explanation for my research interest, might be offered. After I had graduated I did a period of voluntary work in the Learning Support Department (the modern, more ‘inclusive’ term for the ‘special needs’ class) at Beccles Middle – my old school between the ages of nine and thirteen. I left after a month to take up an administrative job at the development NGO Christian Aid, in London. Although I had a number of jobs in the organisation the vast majority of my duties were clerical and I decided that in-order to secure a more interesting job in international development I should go back to university and do

some research. I knew that I wanted the broad focus to be on overseas development but I was not sure of the specific issues that I should address. My decision to research a specific discourse referred to as *special educational needs* in a developing country context was based, or so I thought at the time, on no background specialism but rather a decision to combine two fields I had enjoyed working in. The question then became ‘which developing country should I chose to do my fieldwork in?’ vacillating between sticking a pin in a map and the attractive possibility of spending a few months in the Caribbean ostensibly being erudite I thought I should perhaps reflect more seriously about my reasons for selecting a country. As I thought more deeply I slowly began to realise that conducting fieldwork somewhere in the Indian sub-continent could provide me with an ideal opportunity to learn something about an unexamined aspect of my heritage. I could bring the ‘other’ side of my being into sharper focus.

Why I chose India over Pakistan I do not really know. Perhaps it was because I had spent more time pouring over the great spiritual literatures associated with India (since I first became self-consciously interested in spiritual issues at the age of twenty) relating to Buddhism and Hinduism than those associated with Islam (something which has changed during the course of this thesis). Perhaps it was because somewhat simplistically, although not disingenuously, I believed that Pakistan was a line drawn in the sand owing to a sectarian animosity (and a colonial legacy) that I wanted no part in. Naively I saw India and Pakistan as imagined nations and as such I did not want to pick an Us over a Them.

My father tried to, but could not really, conceal his disappointment that I opted for India – perhaps if his earliest memories had not been shaped by hearing stories about

Muslims having their throats slit by angry Hindus who boarded the train which carried his family to the newly created Pakistan he might have felt differently. But neither I, nor he, can change the memories which crucially inform who we are and my ambiguous sense of self is no less valid than his Islamic psyche. Various episodes that have taken place as I have moved between India and England (my two countries of ‘origin’) have revealed that even if I can justify to myself this simplistic self-categorisation – other people may have reasons for defining me in alternative (perhaps contrasting ways). This is why I believe it is important to see one’s existence and sense of self in Buberian terms – as conditioned by relationship.

### **Confronting Prejudice in Mumbai**

On my third visit to Mumbai I was there to attend the wedding of a very old childhood friend of mine from Beccles. He was marrying into a wealthy Indian family and was having traditional celebrations that stretched over five days and culminated in a Hindu wedding ceremony at the exclusive Taj hotel. The other wedding (for which I was best man) was to be held in a stately home in Scotland (although he and I had grown up in Beccles together his ancestry did not qualify him as a Suffolk local either). I was spending a couple of weeks in Mumbai before flying down to Chennai for my second major period of fieldwork. My fieldwork was planned to neatly fall in between the dates of the two weddings.

Being in Mumbai with some of my oldest friends from Beccles was a bizarre experience in itself but I will not dwell on this here. I mention this episode because on one occasion my friends and I had been taken to a shoe shop to buy some traditional chapals (or sandals) for the wedding celebrations. The bride’s father had perhaps

arranged some sort of deal with the owner because all of the foreign guests were taken to this shop to purchase footwear. When I entered with all my white friends the owner immediately struck up a conversation with me and was incredibly friendly and interested in my background. He asked what my father did, what I was doing, what I had read at university – all the questions that a stereotypically ambitious Asian father might be interested in. He then told me about his family and educational background and his daughter. When he mentioned his daughter I remember feeling as if it was almost like I was being eyed up as potential marriage material. The concept of an arranged marriage has always struck me as strange (even though dad used to joke when I was still very young that he wanted to arrange a marriage between myself and Susan, the girl who spilt the milk, given that her academic credentials were evident from an early age). The shoe shop owner told me that his family had moved from Karachi (in what is now Pakistan) to Mumbai during partition. Hitherto I had been very wary about who I revealed my Muslim heritage to because I had become acutely aware of border tensions between India and Pakistan during my first trip to India and the consequent possibility of sectarian hostilities that are common when the political climate is such. For some reason I let my guard slip, perhaps because of the affable tenor of the conversation. I cheerily commented ‘oh really, my father’s family went the opposite way.’ A split second after I realised that what for me was a fairly meaningless event (a line drawn in the sand), served to indelibly mark me in his eyes as a Muslim-enemy-other. The expression in the owner’s eyes changed from warmth to coldness. He stood up, remarked ‘oh I see’ and walked away from a dialogue that I felt had not, although for him it clearly had, finished.

What he saw was my Muslim background – something which, for me, was very nebulous, was very clear to him. The channels of communication and friendship could be severed on the strength of a singular dimension of my being, a perceived aspect of my identity, which I had only very dimly been aware of whilst growing up. It struck me that unpleasant as this episode was – it was precisely these sorts of encounters that could help me to understand my Indian/Pakistani heritage more clearly. This episode also helped me to reflect more deeply about the nature of participation and perceptions of selfhood – if human beings are rigidly defined (by themselves or others) according to narrowly simplistic criteria, genuine inclusion (belonging, participation, acceptance) is prohibited if lines are then drawn which rigidly demarcate an Us from a Them.

Ironically the event that helped me to understand what it felt like to be perceived as unspeakable to (untouchable?) took place in a shoe shop, that part of the body most associated with pollution and impurity in the Hindu cosmology – the part of the body from which the lowest servant caste emanated from in the Vedic creation hymn the Purusa Sukta (see Chapter Five). In many respects I am more comfortable with the brand of ‘Us and Themism’ that I encountered growing up in the UK and that was displayed by the lad who called me a fucking Paki. It is a ‘purer’ form of segregation because dialogue is neither countenanced nor attempted. The possibility of acceptance and friendship is not offered before it is quickly rescinded because of who you are, or who you are dogmatically deemed to be by another. If you don’t like someone because of the colour of their skin there is no question of opening up the channels of communication.

It is in this sense that I believe it is important to understand the Buberian existential position that we are complex selves-in-relation and not simple and fixed selves. In much the same way that Heraclitus believed that you cannot step into the same river twice, I believe that human beings can never be pigeon holed according to the same rigid criteria twice. Our sense of self shifts and changes according to our inter-relationship with the particular contexts (social, political, cultural, religious, national) and life-forms (sentient and non-sentient) that we come into contact with. An interest in Buddhist philosophy has led me to the belief that human beings are really human ‘becomings’ and that the notion of a fixed and stable sense of self (egotism) does violence to the fluidity of a more-authentic-because-less-circumscribed mode of self awareness. And this, as I shall argue later, has implications for how we view Dalit emancipation and participation in learning. Learning environments that provide suitable spaces for human beings in the process of becoming (Dalits seeking to transcend caste consciousness) should encourage critical self-reflection.

### **Beccles Middle School...Including the ‘Other’ and Some Thoughts on my own Special Educational Needs.**

Although my association with Beccles Middle School begins in 1984, when at the age of nine I began my first year there, it did not end when I left the school at thirteen. I also engaged in two periods of voluntary work in the learning support department many years later. The first period I mentioned above. The second was when I began my research with a view to exploring a specific discourse about marginalised learners referred to by some as Special Educational Needs.

As a pupil at Beccles Middle I do not recall ever having felt that I was on the margins of the school community. Yes, I had to endure the odd racially abusive comment but then my friend whose father admitted his homosexuality whilst we were there, or the ‘spastics in the thick class’ probably had it worse. Academically I was successful – I was in the top set for every subject and therefore other than playtime (and even then not significantly) I rarely crossed paths with the children from (what was then) the special needs class whom the school ‘categorised as low in attainment, disabled or deviant in behaviour’ (Booth and Ainscow, 1998, p. 3) and whom the other children less kindly and equally exclusively categorised as ‘spastic’. I knew from an early age that my father wanted me to go to Oxbridge (the dream of every stereotypically ambitious Asian parent – both Indian and Pakistani – who admired these bastions of English erudition) and, despite not being at all sure that I would make the grade, this certainly impinged upon my early conceptualisation of educational success. It was balanced by a mother who impressed upon her children that ‘happiness in life’ was more important than intellectual endeavour, and that wisdom does not only reside in scholarly learning\*.

In this small slice of autobiographical detail there is probably much that can be extrapolated and pushed further concerning barriers to participation in learning. In my case the issue of race (and skin colour) was one element that I was conscious of in terms of my inclusion in the school and wider community, even if it did not have a significantly detrimental effect on my educational attainment. Home life and parental aspirations indubitably affected the extent to which I participated in school and, more

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\* This picture is of course a little too black and white – my father as an English teacher in a comprehensive school in the deprived area of Lowestoft insists that a child who is predicted to fail and passes means as much to him as a child whom he helps to get into a top flight university. My mother still nagged me to do my homework when I’d have been much happier down the pub.

generally how I conceptualised learning and this, along with episodes such as the one that I recount below, have helped me to realise that the emphasis and value placed on education and learning in the home context, and indeed the wider community is a significant dimension to understand when exploring participation in learning.

Whether one sees education and learning as crucial tools with which to negotiate life, a necessary hurdle that has to be jumped on the path to employment, something that one tries to avoid by sneaking crafty fags behind the bike shed, or a luxury that one's family cannot afford, will colour the extent to which one is able to, or chooses to, participate in education. Indeed reflecting on my fieldwork experiences it became very clear that parental background and home life played a very significant role in the extent to which marginalised children in Tamil Nadu could or did participate in schooling and learning.

I witnessed one particularly striking example of negative expectation impinging on a child's self-image (and the collective image he had of his peers) when, after graduating, I returned to Beccles Middle to become a voluntary Learning Support Assistant (LSA) in the learning resource centre. On this occasion I had taken a group of four lads (all of whom had statements) out into the corridor to work on a piece of writing. One of the lads, obviously disenchanted with the exercise asked me why they had to do it. I gave a fairly stock response – becoming literate would help them to make choices in life that they might not otherwise have, it might help them to get jobs that were more interesting and provide them with more opportunities. The lad responded, not with anger but a degree of fatalism that quite upset me - 'what's the fucking point, we're all going to end up at Buxted' (the local chicken factory)? 'Who



told you that?’ I asked. ‘My dad’ he replied. I made a dispirited attempt to disabuse the lad of these negative expectations – but in reality, having spent six months myself night cleaning at Buxted, I knew that there was a good chance he would be right.

Here we have a profoundly significant barrier to participation in learning. Before the child was in his teenage years – his future had been ordained. What the child was effectively being told by his father was that education was irrelevant. Speaking personally, I know that, conversely, positive aspirations go a long way – I do not remember a time when it was ever in doubt that I would attend university. Of course a balance must be found between the extremes of unrealistic expectation and negative fatalism and whether one has the freedom to make informed choices in these matters certainly come into play.

One thing that struck me as supremely relevant to the issue of educational opportunity is the role played by labelling – or the simplistic categorisation of individuals according to narrowly defined criteria which prevents seeing selfhood and identity in more dynamic terms. Of course a child is not simply given one label (stupid, deviant, likeable, intelligent) that determines his or her educational achievements in a mono-causal or unidirectional sense. Different teachers behave differently to the same child. The same child behaves differently in different classes. Children and teachers have good days and bad days. New labels are given, revised, discarded. New medical terms explain behavioural patterns and so-called ‘abnormalities’. Children play up to and deny the labels that their peers, teachers and parents give them. However as the history of special education suggests (e.g. Tomlinson, 1982) educational categories have often been applied in an excessively simplistic and inflexible fashion.

From just a short period of observation at Beccles Middle I could see that labelling and expectation were profoundly complex sets of issues albeit ones that are crucial to explore because they can alternatively serve as an opportunity for, or barrier to, educational participation. The ‘chicken factory’ anecdote is one stark exemplar. Robert and his brother, Rupert demonstrate that there is a complex constellation of issues that need to be addressed.

I first met Robert, the elder of the two brothers, during my initial stint at Beccles Middle. To begin with, he struck me as boisterous, a troublemaker in class and a bit of a thug but he had that spark that I recognised in Michael. He would walk down corridors on his way to the next class (invariably late) and knock pencil cases and books from the arms of other children. Quite often other children would look frightened when Robert passed them, with good reason I felt – I remember him being just the sort of lad that I found intimidating at school. He was often disruptive in the mainstream classes that I accompanied him to and at first he was as petulant with me as he was with the other teachers. He was statemented and had been ‘diagnosed’ with ADHD. On first impressions he seemed to conform to the archetypal image of a ‘behaviourally challenged’ boy – just the sort of boy who may have inspired teachers in days gone by, to use the cautionary comment that if a child continued behaving badly they would ‘end up in the thick class’. (I was told by the SENCO that she had heard teachers make comments like this in the past).

To have dismissed Robert on these terms would have probably cemented a fairly negative and unprofitable relationship with him in the sense that I am not sure to what

extent he would have opened up to me or been encouraged to participate in the learning process. However by playing a fairly non-typical role I was able to get quite close to some of the kids. I was an LSA and therefore not a typical teacher. I let them swear and often made comments that were perhaps not entirely appropriate, I even managed to get reprimanded by the dinner lady (something that had not happened for some twenty years previously) for playing piggy back fights on the school field when it was wet. I did this intentionally – but will need to balance this approach with ethical considerations in future. I knew that I was making headway with Robert when he asked if I wanted any tobacco (Golden Virginia £3.00 a pouch, Drum £2.50). Perhaps a slightly more wholesome example was when he worked particularly hard on a piece of science work for me – he sacrificed three break times to complete the piece and re-wrote it twice to make sure it was neat. The Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator showed me an example of a piece of work Robert did when he was not similarly enthused (one ink splodged sentence on a sheet of crumpled A4).

Robert was an example of someone who had been labelled and marginalized within the school system – but he was a far more complex character than he was often given credit for. One of the children in the learning resource unit, Vicky, had been labelled profoundly learning impaired (and was about to be sent to the local special school). She was often the butt of her classmates' jokes (children who themselves were taunted by others from the mainstream). Robert often insisted that Vicky sat next to him, he offered her help when she was having difficulties and he frequently vociferously defended Vicky when she was picked on by others.

Robert was obviously bright and I could tell that he had the capacity to be very compassionate, despite his boisterous antics at times. When I returned to Beccles Middle two years later Robert's younger brother Rupert was also in the learning resource class. The educational 'experts' were not entirely sure what was 'wrong' with him. At times they felt that he had Tourettes, at other times they thought he had ADHD like his brother. I remembered having read somewhere that there is a school of thought that postulates that one is genetically disposed to ADHD and couldn't help thinking that this may have had an impact on 'expert prognostication'. I liked Rupert because he reminded me of Robert – which, as I reflect now, is no less an act of labelling than assigning him a medical condition. Robert, I learnt, had been expelled from school and in Rupert's words did nothing – he just sits around the house and rides his bike. Robert had, as I saw it, enormous potential – there were numerous aspects of his personality and numerous innate abilities that could have been tapped, encouraged and developed by others to furnish him with educational opportunities. One doesn't need a degree in educational psychology to recognise wasted potential and I think, even if we take umbrage at the language used by the Enlightenment educationalist Pestalozzi, we cannot fail to agree with the spirit of his assertion:

“Hundreds of wretched men are lost for the want of someone who might rouse them to a sense of their inner worth”. (P7).

### **Living in Norfolk, or 'Roots Betrayed'.**

At the same time that I was doing my second period of voluntary work at Beccles Middle School I was also working in a restaurant called A Taste of India and a Taste of China. It was directly opposite the house that I had bought in Harleston, Norfolk after 'returning' from London to do my PhD at the University of East Anglia in

Norwich. I took this job because I had not managed to secure ESRC funding.

Harleston is a small market town just the wrong side of the Suffolk/Norfolk divide if you are a Suffolk lad like myself. It is, for all the regional animosities between the two counties not very dissimilar to Beccles in that it is conspicuously white (something which struck me even more strongly after the two years that I had spent in London) with ethnic diversity, again, being largely confined to the restaurant business.

This particular restaurant was, however, slightly peculiar in that it had one kitchen staffed by two Muslim chefs from Bangladesh which, served the type of food generically labelled in the UK 'Indian' and another kitchen, staffed by two Chinese chefs which served the type of food that is generically labelled 'Chinese' but has never been encountered by any of my friends who have visited China. The owner of the restaurant could have ticked White-English on an ethnic disclosure form. In fact it was the owner that had stopped me in the street on my way to the supermarket and offered me the job, perhaps taking pity on an impoverished student but possibly to add a dash of 'ethnic authenticity' to the waiting staff – all of whom could also have ticked White-English. Whatever his reasons for offering me the job, there was certainly an interesting admixture of cultural influences in the restaurant – even more complex than my own culturally ambiguous sense of self.

A few episodes relating to my time at the restaurant caused me to reflect in certain ways about my research and possibly had a shaping influence on the types of themes that interested me. At roughly the same time that I was engaging with the literature that suggested inclusive education should not simply be seen in terms of a narrow

special needs/disability agenda, a lad called John came to work at the restaurant. Initially he was employed in the kitchen but owing to the shortage of staff 'out front' he was asked to help as a waiter. I was given the task of helping to acquaint him with the procedure 'out front'. It was clear that he lacked confidence and self-belief – every time he made a mistake he would attribute it to the Attention Deficit Disorder that he had been diagnosed with at school. Given my academic interest in this area I asked him what had been the reasons offered by the educational psychologists that had made the diagnosis. He said something like 'I don't really know, I think it was something to do with the fact that I couldn't concentrate on my work and I kept getting up and talking to my friends'. Presumably the educational psychologists would have a more intellectually rigorous story to tell but I could not help feeling that this didn't sound radically different from the 'daydreaming' and 'often allows friends to distract him' that I was constantly criticised for in my early school reports. Furthermore – the label that he had been given had impinged so significantly on his sense of self that it continued to affect his feelings of self-worth and the confidence that he had in his ability to perform certain tasks long after leaving school. This episode, as much as the literature that I had been reading, helped me to realise that labels, when they confine a human being's sense of self do not permit that individual to confront life in the free and creative way that, I believe, is so important for human becoming.

Another highly illuminating episode which caused a radical disjuncture in my sense of self was when I was asked by the head chef in the Indian kitchen to take him to the prayers which marked the end of Ramadan at a Mosque in Ipswich. Ipswich is a Suffolk town that I did not really know very well although my grandfather had been

cremated there because of some family connections on my mother's side (not sufficiently deep rooted to determine me as a local however). When I agreed, the chef insisted that I join in the prayers. I had never really formally prayed before in any religious context (other than the Lords Prayer which we were required to recite at school) and I certainly knew nothing of the Muslim prayer ritual. However I thought it would be another interesting opportunity to explore an aspect of my heritage, and so I agreed. It was paradoxically a very illuminating and very confusing experience that forced me once again to confront an uncertain sense of self. When I got to Ipswich I was faced with an unremarkable Suffolk town. It was larger, more ethnically diverse than Beccles, but still notably familiar to me. Woolworths in the town centre. Houses painted in the traditional Suffolk pink that would have originally been so coloured by the pigs blood that the paint contained rather than the consanguinous mix of modern chemicals that today provide the pigment. And yet, walking with my Muslim friends who were wearing traditional Islamic prayer hats, I felt uncomfortably self-conscious and that somehow I did not belong on the streets that otherwise would have been reassuringly similar to the ones that I had grown up on. I felt like I was attracting more attention than I would normally have done from the passers by. Was this because of the people I was walking with? Was this just the heightened paranoia induced post 9-11?

When I got to the mosque no one gave me a second look – I was one among many brown faces. Glad that 'although I may have felt white I did not look it' I awkwardly tried to mimic the two chefs who were obviously very comfortable in this environment although they had only been to this particular mosque once before. Nervously I made the ablutions and washed my hands and feet, head, mouth and nose

in the wrong order. I did not fit in. Were people already beginning to notice something strange about me despite my familiar appearance? My head was always the last to bend in supplication during the actual prayer ceremony – not understanding Arabic or the symbolic significance of the ceremonial procedures, visually convincing as I was I realised that I was playing at being Muslim. Interestingly the next time I went to prayers the procedure was still strange but less so even though it was at a mosque in Bandra, Mumbai. My friend Ahmed who worked at the Spastics Society insisted that I join him for Namaz one Friday. Both he and his family, as I discovered when he invited me to his parents house for a traditionally Muslim meal of Biriani, believed that I always have been and always will be a Muslim because of my father's heritage. Again during my prayers in Bandra, after I had washed my feet and hands, head mouth and nose (this time in the right order), I was forced to confront once more my ambiguous sense of self when I realised that the prayers were being dedicated to 'our Muslim brothers in Iraq' – a country that had recently been invaded by the armed forces of my birth place in the name of freedom. Ahmed's family, members of that famously hospitable and cohesive Islamic community which binds co-religionists in a fraternal spirit that transcends national difference, had accepted me because of my perceived Muslim heritage (whether I felt myself to belong or not). My sense of self again was determined as much by relationship and context as it was by a static experience of subjectivity.

## **India**

India is one of those countries that makes you feel alive in that you can run the gamut of human emotions in very condensed periods of time. One moment you can be witnessing scenes and acts of immense beauty – the ancient architectural wonders,



magnificent landscapes or something as simple as a family of strangers sharing their last roti with you on a long train journey. However one can also witness many ugly, painful and depressing sights. Acts of extreme cruelty – perhaps none more so than the willingness to dehumanise and terrorise great swathes of the country's population simply because of their birth into a particular religion or caste. It would have been quite possible to dedicate an entire chapter of this thesis to the experiences that I had during my fieldtrips to India which caused me to reflect very deeply, and often in a very startling way, about many things including my fractured sense of self. In fact, although the five months spent working with the Spastics Society did not afford me a great deal of opportunity to explore participation in learning, almost daily I was given interesting insights into cultures and experiences that would have been similar in some ways (but very different in other ways) to those that my father would have encountered when he was growing up. My self-reflexive faculty went into overdrive and I can only offer a snapshot of some of the more significant events that might have influenced my research focus.

When I say significant I do not necessarily mean events of global importance (although below I do touch upon some events that could be categorised as such). I find it fascinating that an event of almost mind-numbing banality can (if one scratches the surface) have a significant impact upon our sense of self. Chance encounters and random relationships can speak eloquently about who we are if we are prepared to exercise the self-reflective faculty and I am inclined to agree with Buber when he states 'All real living is meeting.' For example, I wish now to turn to a very interesting episode that took place on my first day in Bombay that had, upon

reflection, quite a disorientating effect on my notion of selfhood and identity. A good deal of introspection followed hard on the heels of a fleeting social interaction.

### ***Engaging an Other...Confronting the Self***

I had decided that on my first day in an unfamiliar city I could make an obvious display of my status as an ‘outsider’ and use a map to explore, conscious of the fact that given my appalling sense of direction I would invariably get lost anyway! Or I could wander the streets, certainly getting lost, but in doing so soak up something of the flavour of metropolitan India. Perhaps a little incautiously I chose the latter option. As I walked I was confronted with a multi-sensory bombardment from all sides, choking traffic pollution, a thousand car and rickshaw horns all sounding at once, dust, commotion, cows, beggars, heat, chaos and the peculiar sensation that I had encountered all of Bombay’s 16 million residents in this one street that I was trying to fight my way down. Amidst the confusion and exotica I was greeted with a sight that I experienced as familiar and reassuring. It was a white woman walking towards me dressed in ‘Indian’ regalia (perhaps her own tacit attempt to deny the label ‘outsider’). As soon as our eyes met however I noticed that she immediately averted her attention – she walked past and the episode was over. For her it was perhaps not even a footnote in her Indian experience, for me, however, it had a profoundly reorienting effect on my sense of self.

My train of thought went something like this...I saw this white woman as familiar but just because she was white this did not make her English – she could have been French, Dutch, American or African. I was therefore confronted with the fact that I had made an immensely naïve conflation – whiteness with Englishness, and

accordingly, with familiarity. Although I do not think it is a mistake that I would have made had I been thinking carefully about the subject of identity, nationality and skin colour, perhaps having been brought up in rural Suffolk in a sea of white faces meant that this simplistic equation existed somewhere in my interpretive frame of reference and came into play in this ostensibly insignificant social interaction. If we deconstruct this particular text still further it is possible that the woman had averted her eyes rapidly because, as advised by the Lonely Planet Guide to India, she had wanted to avoid the unwarranted attention of an (Indian) male. Probably to her I was just another face amongst the teeming multitudes.

Exercising the self-reflective imagination here helped me take a long look at myself in relation to a significant other. My sense of self was disorientated in a way that was personally unsettling, but at the same time it opened up interesting possibilities for thinking about where I myself feel included and excluded in relation to my dual heritage, where I feel myself to 'belong' and indeed having implications for who I feel myself to be. As I reflect once more upon this episode I realise that my self-reflective imagination can only make haphazard guesses at the white woman's background and story. This was not real meeting in the Buberian sense because this encounter is my side of the story – a monologue and not a dialogue. The woman could have been born in India, have had an intimate and longstanding acquaintance with the country...just because she was white didn't mean that she fell neatly into the White-English category that I had placed her in, in my mind.

## ***Belonging***

If this event reveals the poverty of simplistic ethnic categorisation and suggests that the notion of self requires more subtle investigation, an event in a canteen in Madras blurred the boundaries of my own sense of self even further. I had been in Madras, or Chennai as the city is now called to reclaim its Indian identity and refute the colonial legacy, about two months.

My data collection with Social Action Movement was going well and I was feeling far happier about being in India than I had done during my time in Mumbai. Something about being in South India (my father's birthplace) made me happy – perhaps it was the sing song cadence of the ancient Indian language Tamil that appealed to me, perhaps it was the ubiquitous smell of jasmine that the women in South India traditionally wear in their hair, or the traditional Dosa breakfast that I looked forward to every morning and which reminded me of pancakes. Perhaps it was nothing more romantic than that Madras was not Bombay, a city which made me feel like a rat in a cage. I was also feeling more comfortable about being in India in general, this was my third visit to the country and there was a reassuring familiarity to some of the things which had, at first, been very exotic and alien. I didn't feel as far from home as I had done on my first visit. I don't think I could say that I was becoming more Asian/Other or less English but my sense of self was evolving and this was having an interesting impact upon my comfort levels in particular contexts.

On one occasion I had been doing some research at the Dalit Media Network (DMN) library, breaking for lunch I asked Mr P if he could recommend a good place to eat – somewhere where his staff might go for lunch. In the early days I had been cautious

about the food I ate and where I ate it. My delicate western constitution invariably meant that a slip up could result in a fairly unpleasant case of Delhi-belly. However, over time, my constitution had grown stronger presumably given my exposure to a variety of different bugs. Now I ate anywhere I fancied with no adverse consequences – one woman even remarked on my distinctly un-foreign disregard for the hygiene standards of the places I ate and drank. I was taken to a canteen about five minutes walk away from the DMN buildings. I had been to similar eateries in Kanchipuram. One is given a freshly washed banana leaf which serves as a plate. Then a number of different people individually come up and serve on to your leaf-plate a variety of staple South Indian meal components – rice, chutney, papad, sambal. The lunch menu is fixed at fifteen rupees (less than 50 pence) and restricted to this one basic, but very filling meal. One does not have the enormous variety of dishes that say a restaurant like the Taste of India would offer but then 15 rupees wouldn't even buy you a coke, let alone satisfy your hunger there.

As I sat shovelling handfuls of rice and sambal into my mouth, tapping my fingers on the banana leaf, as I had learnt to do in order to remove the excess rice from my fingers, and then scooping up another handful of food I realised that a practice which at first had seemed strange (eating with one's hands) had become second nature. I was not attracting a great deal of attention in the canteen because I did not look very different from my fellow diners who, like me were eating quietly and gesturing with a raised hand or an acquiescent sideways nodding of the head to indicate whether they wanted more or were satiated. Instantaneously I felt a warm glow, a feeling of belonging in some small, but not insignificant way. And then the slow but familiar feeling that things were not quite this simple. As I reflected I suddenly felt very sad as

I recalled an early childhood memory. When we were younger my mother had stopped my father from eating with his hands because this would encourage us kids to do the same and make a complete mess of our dinner as we triumphantly responded ‘well dad is, why can’t we?’ Presumably it was not helping her to inculcate what she felt to be decent table manners. It struck me that, for all the love and affection that was so clearly evident in my parent’s relationship, this was a small act of colonisation – the subjugation of a cultural practice in the name of ‘civilising’ progress. Heavy handed as the imagery is I could not help but feel that perhaps my ‘soul’ had been colonised because of the pervasive influence of my English heritage, and that my research in India was my own struggle for freedom and independence. When I related some of these thoughts to my mother and father, unsurprisingly they had very different reactions. My father laughed and said that it was illuminating to hear me speak about such matters. My mother, however, was far more defensive and launched into a fairly lengthy diatribe about the essence of relationship as compromise. Yes dad might have had to compromise about his eating habits (although, to this day he still occasionally eats with his hands) but she also had to compromise about many things which had been important to her at one point in her life but had become less so because of her relationship with my father. My father did not participate in carol or hymn singing at Christmas and so this became a less important part of the way that she celebrated the festival because she was unable to share these things with him.

If such autobiographical reflections provided me with interesting insights into the nature of selfhood and belonging, the conversation that I had with my parents revealed the fluidity of the interpretive act as well as the extent to which the self-reflective act is enhanced by dialogue with others. The ‘jihad’ that we are engaged in

to understand ourselves is more meaningful, I would suggest, if we appreciate the importance of relationship. As Buber states:

“She who takes her stand in relation shares in a reality, that is, in a being that neither merely belongs to her nor merely lies outside her. All reality is an activity in which I share without being able to appropriate for myself.”

(2002, p. 85)

It is the possibility of un-prejudiced communion with others, which I believe is opened up if we begin to question the rigidity of fixed self-centred modes of perception and categorisations. The ‘judge not...’ that is important for human relationship. As I reflect now I realise that some of the episodes that I have drawn on in this chapter to demonstrate my fluid sense of self, have in fact been examples of my own closed and rigid self-centred (and judgemental) reflection on my interactions with significant others. I did not discuss my thoughts with the shoe shop owner, the white woman in Bombay, the Muslims that I have met and prayed with in the mosques in England and India. This chapter has predominantly been a self-reflective monologue – useful to illustrate the case for human becoming but not really very representative of what Buber would refer to as ‘real living’ (i.e. meeting).

Time and space restrictions mean that I must regrettably bring this chapter to a close. Although the text of my life is far more complex than these reflections suggest, as a data source it has been a very illuminating and enjoyable one to trawl no matter how superficially. To close it would be nice to bring the chapter up to date and reflect upon my thoughts in the wake of the bombings in London on July 7th 2005 and the impact that these had on my sense of self. I could reflect on being stopped at Edinburgh

airport on my way back to Luton carrying a large backpack after a walking holiday in the Highlands (during the G8 meetings in Scotland), the immediate feeling of indignation but then reading in the paper the next day about the suicide bombers – ‘home grown’ British Asians like myself, quiet lads into martial arts and cricket who all met up at Luton carrying large back packs looking like they were going on a walking holiday. However this would be too neat a finish for a chapter that attempts to show that the beauty of the human project of becoming is precisely the creative possibility engendered by openness, the freedom that a fluid sense of self affords one and the opportunity for genuine participation with other complex and fluid selves. Thus I leave the reader to reflect as they wish...



## **Chapter Five: Exploring Caste Consciousness - Towards**

### **a Contextual Understanding of Dalit Emancipation and**

### **Participation in Learning**

In this chapter I have a two-fold purpose. Firstly I seek to place the three research themes in an ideological, cultural and historical framework. I attempt to analyse some of the factors that have a) either contributed to, or worked against, the subjugation of Dalit communities and the denial of self-determination and b) served as a barrier to, or opportunity for, Dalit participation in learning. Given the central importance that I attach to self-reflective inquiry in promoting Dalit emancipation I attempt to examine the extent to which these ideological, cultural and historical factors might inhibit or facilitate critical self-reflection. The second purpose of this chapter is to place my case study of Social Action Movement in context. I explore some of the ideas and practices that help us make sense of SAM's work; not only those that they oppose and seek to undermine, but also those that have shaped the way that SAM campaign for Dalit emancipation.

I begin at the ideological level by exploring two ancient sources (the earliest dating from approximately 1,000 BC) both of which have had a profoundly significant effect on the shaping of caste consciousness. The first is the Vedic creation hymn the Purusa Sukta widely accepted as one of the earliest references to the notion of Varna (the four-fold ordering of the cosmos – see below). The second *Manu Smriti* is regarded as the most comprehensive early codification of Hindu Law and conceived as the epitome of Dalit subjugation by many Dalit activists. I argue that both texts have been instrumental in the construction of a hegemonic paradigm which views some human

beings as innately inferior to others. Furthermore one can evidence that Manu Smriti enshrines the idea that Dalits should be prevented from, and punished for, participating in learning – a doctrine that has perpetuated the oppression of Dalits for centuries.

In the next section of the chapter I look at how this hegemonic paradigm has impacted upon the structure of Indian society and how the concept of Varna has been translated into what Srinivas (1952) calls ‘the real unit of the caste system’ - *Jati* defined as a ‘very small endogamous group practicing a traditional occupation’ (in Beteille 1969, p. 265). I draw on the work of various Indian and foreign sociologists/anthropologists to explore the institutionalisation of Varna or caste consciousness. I examine some of the practices and symbols of the caste system (which organisations like SAM vehemently repudiate) and the detrimental effect that internalising the logic of caste hierarchy can have on Dalit communities.

The third main section of this chapter identifies two important ‘developments’ in Indian history and very briefly (given the scope of this chapter) touches upon some ways in which they have impacted upon not only the idea of caste but also the caste system. I try to think about how Colonialism and Independence have changed and/or challenged the structural and ideological impact of caste. Given the potential enormity of this task I limit my discussion to certain issues which have a direct or distinctive impact upon either Dalit participation in learning or Dalit emancipation.

In the final section of this chapter I explore the issue of self-reflective inquiry and the transformation of Dalit-Hindu consciousness. I first look at particular schools of thought which attempt to transform Dalit consciousness by deconstructing and then

refuting caste/Hindu consciousness. Here I focus on the work of the iconic figurehead of the Dalit emancipation movement Dr. Ambedkar whose ideas that have crucially informed the activities of Social Action Movement. I also briefly examine aspects of the Tamillian resistance to Hindu-Brahmin hegemony and the development of a distinctively Dravidian (see below) politics. These moves towards developing an emancipatory ideology-belief include, as Aloysius (1998) neatly encapsulates:

“Appropriating a collective name, propounding an autonomous interpretation of history, staking a claim for self-determination, and in short setting up a [collective] identity.” (p. 165)

In stark contrast to these developments I look at two very different attempts to assert a Hindu consciousness that, in different ways, are seen to have a detrimental impact upon Dalit emancipation. The first are ideas espoused by Hindu reformers who reject a belief in the innate inferiority of Dalits but continue to promote the redemptive qualities of Hinduism. The second is the aggressive nationalism that dominated Indian politics during my fieldwork (Hindutva), which seeks to establish a vigorous pan-Indian Hindu identity in opposition to other minority groups in India. Organisations like SAM assert that both sets of ideas inhibit Dalit emancipation precisely because they attempt to deny that Dalits are in anyway separate from other Hindus.

## **Part One: Caste and the Shaping of Consciousness**

### **The Purusa Sukta (c. 1000 BC)**

One of the earliest references to the fourfold ordering of the cosmos (the classical theory of Varna) is in the ancient Hindu book of hymns, the Rig Veda comprising of

sacred verses composed over several centuries and dating from about 1,000-1,500 BC (Easwaran, 1988). Below I describe in more detail the ‘complex’ relationship between the Varna system and the caste system but my concern here is to focus on one of the later hymns, the Purusa Sukta or *Hymn of Man*, an attempt to express cosmological order which recounts the dismemberment of the cosmic giant Purusa. Donniger O’Flaherty (2000) notes:

“In this famous hymn, the gods create the world by dismembering the cosmic giant, Purusa, the primeval male who is the victim in a Vedic sacrifice.

Though the theme of the cosmic sacrifice is a widespread mythological motif, this hymn is part of a particularly Indo-European corpus of myths of dismemberment. The underlying concept is, therefore, quite ancient; yet the fact that this is one of the latest hymns in the *Rig Veda* is evident from its reference to the three Vedas (v.9) and to the four social classes or *Varnas* (v.12, *the first time that this concept appears in Indian civilization*), as well as from its generally monistic world-view.” (p. 29-30 my italics)

The verses referring to the Varnas (v.11-v.14) are translated by Donniger O’Flaherty thus:

***11 When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?***

***12 His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born.***

***13 The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born. Indra and Agni came from his mouth, and from his vital breath the Wind was born.***

**14 From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear. Thus they set the worlds in order.**

According to Hindu orthodoxy Vedic wisdom has divine origination. ‘Veda’ in Sanskrit translates as ‘knowledge’ – so there is a sense in which the hymns of the Rig Veda are treated as received theological wisdom. The term ‘Sanatan’ is used to express the idea that the Vedas are ‘eternally pre-existing’ (Ambedkar, 1996). Unsurprisingly, this position is not without its detractors and the very legitimacy of caste can be seen to turn on whether the Vedas have a superhuman origin or not. If caste is divinely ordained, then one can make a case for its immutability. However, if one were to ‘prove’ that caste has its origins in human society then one might legitimately argue for its malleability. One might conjecture that one of the reasons, and possibly even the most salient, for the well-documented antagonism between Ambedkar and Gandhi boiled down to disagreement on this essential issue. I return to this point below, the important thing here is the symbolic significance of the cosmic ordering and the implications that this has had for the hierarchicalisation of society and the imposition of caste consciousness based upon a divinely ordained measure of human purity. Purity/divinity is clearly associated with the head (from which the Brahmins were said to have emanated from) – the heavenly realms (the gods Indra and Agni, the two great celestial spheres the sun and the moon, the wind and the sky) are all associated with Purusa’s head. The further down the giant’s body we go – the closer to the earthly/worldly, and by implication sullied, realm we travel – ‘from his feet the servants were born’ (v.12), ‘from his two feet came the earth’ (v.14). David Smith (2003) argues that the Purusa Sukta hymn is a Brahmin myth:

“...That has been successful over the millennia in justifying and helping to maintain their own position” (p. 37)

And this is why the hymn is identified by Dalit activists as one of the central ideological supports for the caste system and, as such, an important battleground for symbolically resisting caste oppression. Hindu reformers, keen to deny the iniquities of the caste system but equally keen to defend other aspects of Hindu cosmology, are also forced to re-interpret and re-engage with the Purusa Sukta. I draw on the work of Sri Aurobindo and Gandhi to illustrate this point below.

It should be noted that in the *Hymn to Man* there is no mention of a segment of society that lies outside this four-fold division of the classes (namely the Untouchables or Dalits). There is debate in the literature as to the point at, and the process by, which the Dalits became a structurally distinct category (for example see Dumont (1980)) but evidently any group that occupied such a position would be deemed subservient and impure (lower even than those born to serve) – structurally located on the margins of the cosmic purity-impurity continuum – not only ‘untouchable’ but also ‘unnameable’. From the very inception of the caste system then the implication is that Dalit identity is indelibly marked not only by extreme impurity but also by exclusion from the ‘universal’ mainstream (cosmic order), and, for those who believe that the Vedas are *Sanatan*, this is a divinely sanctioned and incontrovertible truth.

### **Manu Smṛti - The Laws of Manu (c. 200 BC)**

Whereas Hindu orthodoxy views the Purusa Sukta hymn as an example of *Sṛuti*, or divine revelation, the Laws of Manu are regarded as *Smṛti*, or religious tradition

accepted as orthodox doctrine. Manu – the primordial human being is taken to be the author of what Smith (2003) refers to as the:

‘...authoritative account of *Varna-ashrama-dharma*, the *dharma* [very roughly translated as ‘moral code’ – see below] of the caste system (Varna) and the stages of life (*ashrama*).’ (p. 42)

This early codification of Hindu law not only placed stringent limitations on Dalit freedom and capacity for self-determination, it also represented a statutory barrier to the participation of Dalits in mainstream Hindu society and formalised learning opportunities. I have used Buhler’s classic edition of Manu Smṛti written in 1886 (available on-line at [www.sacred-texts.org](http://www.sacred-texts.org)).

In considerable detail, Manu sets forth the ritual laws and regulatory principles that govern purity and pollution for the four castes and the penalties for those who transgress them. The laws represent an attempt to enshrine the ideological principle of Varna in a normative framework and cover a diverse range of issues from dietary prohibitions and punishment for sexual misconduct to the appropriate transmission of sacred wisdom. Rules dictate, for example, under what circumstances it is permissible to recite the Vedas, when cow urine is to be used to purify a conch shell and what to do in the event of violating a Guru’s bed (one must extend oneself on a heated iron bed, or embrace the red-hot image (of a woman) according to verse 11.103.

According to Manu there exist only four castes, verse 10.4 states that there is no fifth caste:

*10.4 Brahmana, the Kshatriya, and the Vaisya castes (varna) are the twice-born ones, but the fourth, the Shudra, has one birth only; there is no fifth (caste).*

In accordance with the Purusa Sukta the Brahmins (or Brahmana) represent the zenith of this Varna system, verse 10.3 states:

*On account of his pre-eminence, on account of the superiority of his origin, on account of his observance of (particular) restrictive rules, and on account of his particular sanctification the Brahmana is the lord of (all) castes (Varna).*

Unlike the Purusa Sukta, however, Manu makes explicit reference to a segment of society that is excluded from this schema and therefore from legitimate participation in the ‘pure’ social order:

*10.45. All those tribes in this world, which are excluded from (the community of) those born from the mouth, the arms, the thighs, and the feet (of Brahman), are called Dasyus, whether they speak the language of the Mlekkhas (barbarians) or that of the Aryans.*

It is interesting to note here the use of the terms Aryan, Dasyus and Mlekkhas. The Sanskritic words Dasyus (meaning dark) and Mlekkhas (meaning barbarian) signify contempt and are used by the Aryan authors of the Vedas to denote their superiority to, and separation from, the non-Aryans. In Chapter Seven I return to the point that these categorisations relate to a historically contested theory that a (light-skinned) invading/migrating (depending upon one’s view point) Aryan civilisation from central Asia suppressed or incorporated an indigenous (dark-skinned) population and brought with them, along with their deities, warlike habits and sacrificial rituals, ideas about



the hierarchical division of society. This is forcefully expressed in the following comments made by the Dalit activist Rajshekar (2002):

“The Aryans who invaded our country between 1050-2000 BC were mainly from Europe. Today’s whites are called Indo-Europeans. But we are the native Indians. Every country in the world has got this problem of invaders and indigenous people. Wherever the Aryans invaded, they succeeded in eliminating the indigenous people. But India is the only country in the world where Aryans failed to annihilate the indigenous people of India completely. Even after the massive slaughter, oppression and genocide that our forefathers faced, our population continues to remain at 85 per cent and the alien Aryan *sarvana* population is just 15 per cent. India is the only country where the Aryans are a minority. The Aryan *sarvanas* are a minority because they are aliens.” (p. 76)

One may question the history but the polemical intent is clear. Us and Them, Light and Dark, Pure and Impure, Foreign and Indigenous, as we shall see, are perennial themes that represent important symbolic battlegrounds for the shaping of caste consciousness.

Manu dictates that amongst those outside the system (and hence society) are groups produced by illicit unions among the different varnas.

*8.353. For by (adultery) is caused a mixture of the castes (varna) among men; thence (follows) sin, which cuts up even the roots and causes the destruction of everything.*

For these outcastes (or *Candala* as he refers to them) Manu lays down a series of prohibitions and restrictions. Their dwellings shall be outside the village or near burial grounds, near certain trees or on mountains and in groves (ergo ostracised from mainstream communities), their wealth shall be dogs and donkeys (verse 10.51) and they shall be ‘known by certain marks and [subsist] by their peculiar occupations’ (verse 10.50). The following verses do nothing to conceal Manu’s contempt for these outcastes:

*10.52. Their dress (shall be) the garments of the dead, (they shall eat) their food from broken dishes, black iron (shall be) their ornaments, and they must always wander from place to place.*

*10.55. By day they may go about for the purpose of their work, distinguished by marks at the king's command, and they shall carry out the corpses (of persons) who have no relatives; that is a settled rule.<sup>1</sup>*

*10.54. Their food shall be given to them by others (than an Aryan giver) in a broken dish; at night they shall not walk about in villages and in towns.*

In the laws of Manu ideas about human duty and obligation are formulated according to the principles of *Varnashrama-dharma*. Fulfilling ones dharma or duty in life, as ordained by birth into a specific caste can be seen as a central pillar of the caste system (see below) and accordingly another important symbolic battleground for those who wish to reject caste consciousness. In his book *An Indian Summer* (1987)

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<sup>1</sup> ***In The Annihilation of Caste (1936) Ambedkar highlights a modern interpretation of this rule;***

“Under the rule of the Peshwas in the Maratha country [...] The untouchable was required to have a black thread either on his wrist or around his neck, as a sign or a mark to prevent the Hindus from getting themselves polluted by his touch by mistake.”

the journalist James Cameron voices the kind of objections to the notion of dharma that reveal why so many Dalit activists refute it:

“...*Dharma*, the obligation to accept one’s condition and perform the duties appropriate to it. This is intrinsic to the whole principle of caste. Not only every individual but every *thing* has this attribute. It is the *dharma* of the wind to blow, and that of the rain to fall; it is the *Dharma* of a stone to be hard and a leaf to be soft. It is likewise the *Dharma* of a Brahmin to be respected, and that of a sweeper to be despised. There is no getting away from it.” (p. 42)

Cameron concludes:

“This age-old and barbaric philosophy maintained the debased Indian victims in the gutter and most of my well-heeled commercial and official Indian acquaintances in comfort, with the Government of India endlessly preaching the betterment of one and leaving untouched the establishment of the other, and this is why India remains basically a country of the hungry and unhappy.” (p. 43)

Whether Cameron would be equally as scathing about aristocracy and monarchy – systems that have perpetuated hereditary inequality and privilege in numerous countries – would be interesting to know. My point here is that Manu’s laws essentially codify the dharma of the four principle castes. Opportunities for self-determination are limited by imposing restrictions on what is, and is not, permissible for the four Varnas in terms of behaviour, diet, conjugal relations, devotional practices etc. and nothing can challenge this divinely ordained schema. It is dharma that underpins cosmic order. Manu states:

*1.87. But in order to protect this universe He, the most resplendent one, assigned separate (duties and) occupations to those who sprang from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet.*

*1.88. To Brahmanas he assigned teaching and studying (the Veda), sacrificing for their own benefit and for others, giving and accepting (of alms).*

*1.89. The Kshatriya he commanded to protect the people, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the Veda), and to abstain from attaching himself to sensual pleasures.*

*1.90. The Vaisya to tend cattle, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the Veda), to trade, to lend money, and to cultivate land.*

*1.91. One occupation only the lord prescribed to the Sudra, to serve meekly even these (other) three castes.*

Only by fulfilling one's dharma does one accrue merit. To transgress is not only to earn disapprobation but also to commit sin against the divine order and this seems to be the crux of dharma and what it is that not only sanctions but also enforces the perpetuation of caste as an institution:

*8.414. A Sudra, though emancipated by his master, is not released from servitude; since that is innate in him, who can set him free from it?*

*10.123. The service of Brahmanas alone is declared (to be) an excellent occupation for a Sudra; for whatever else besides this he may perform will bear him no fruit.*

Therefore Manu's laws represent a moral code of conduct that profoundly restricts aspiration (at least in this lifetime) to social and economic mobility and self-determination generally. They espouse Brahmin supremacy, the subjugation of the lowest castes and the outright exclusion from legitimate participation in society of the Dalits. It is therefore not surprising that Hindu fundamentalists and Dalit activists alike see Manu as a powerful symbol of Brahminical hegemony.

### ***Manu and the prohibition of Dalit participation in learning***

It is highly significant that, according to Manu, it is not in the Dharma of a Shudra (and therefore certainly not in the Dharma of a Dalit) to receive sacred wisdom. Aspiration to learning amongst the lowest castes is therefore anathema to Manu. According to his doctrine only the twice born were legitimately entitled to hear the Vedas, only the Brahmins were legitimately entitled to teach them. The twice born are members of the Varnic categories that are entitled to religious initiation (or second birth) – these are the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya. Only the twice born are allowed to wear the sacred thread which gives them symbolic sanction to learn the Vedas. Those who do not wear the thread (i.e. Shudra and below) are symbolically excluded from the right to learn. Severe penalties were meted out to those who flouted this principle:

*2.116. But he who acquires without permission the Veda from one who recites it, incurs the guilt of stealing the Veda, and shall sink into hell.*

*2.172. (He who has not been initiated) should not pronounce (any) Vedic text excepting (those required for) the performance of funeral rites, since he is on a level with a Sudra before his birth from the Veda.*

*2.113. Even in times of dire distress a teacher of the Veda should rather die with his knowledge than sow it in barren soil.*

*4.81. For he who explains the sacred law (to a Sudra) or dictates to him a penance, will sink together with that (man) into the hell (called) Asamvrita.*

*4.99. Let him not recite (the texts) indistinctly, nor in the presence of Sudras...*

Not only is access to sacred learning restricted to the twice born it is also associated with purity of the soul and the sagacity of adulthood. By implication, those who are not entitled to receive sacred learning are less pure and more childlike (read ignorant) than those who are:

*5.109. The body is cleansed by water, the internal organ is purified by truthfulness, the individual soul by sacred learning and austerities, the intellect by (true) knowledge.*

2.153. 'For (a man) destitute of (sacred) knowledge is indeed a child, and he who teaches him the Veda is his father; for (the sages) have always said "child" to an ignorant man, and "father" to a teacher of the Veda.'

Whilst it is highly unlikely that Manu is the sole architect of the caste system (even if he is credited by some as such) his significance perhaps lies in being seen by many as not only a symbol but also the very epitome of caste based thinking. In *The Annihilation of Caste* (1936) Ambedkar seems to treat Manu Smriti as the key text that justifies and describes the caste system. He writes:

“There is no code of laws more infamous regarding social rights than the Laws of Manu. Any instance from anywhere of social injustice must pale before it.”

(Text available online:

<http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/index.html>)

Punalekar (2001) states:

“Dalit literature often condemns the division and divisiveness among the people and a tightened grip of the religious scriptures and ancient lawgivers. For them, Manu who was a Brahminical lawgiver, is an arch enemy of social equality and freedom. Manu Smriti is hated for its diabolical contents by most Dalit writers of the present times because it preaches hierarchy, dependency and subordination. It denies freedom to some while upholding the divine rights of the Brahminical castes.” (p. 217-8)

Given Manu’s position in the symbolic economy of caste it is hardly surprising that some of the most significant voices in the Dalit liberation movement view the

rejection of Manu's laws as critical not only for the construction of a new socio-cultural order but also for enhancing the participation of Dalits in mainstream society. The 'emancipation of the mind and soul' that Ambedkar regards as a necessary preliminary for the 'political expansion of the people' (*The Annihilation of Caste*, 1936; p. 14) arguably cannot occur without silencing Manu. To this end, and as symbolic resistance to the caste system, Christmas Day 1927 saw copies of Manu Smṛti publicly burned at an event presided over by Ambedkar. Arguably this symbolic gesture adumbrated the Dalit liberation movement's ultimate rejection of Hinduism.

### **Illustrating Caste-Consciousness – The Story of Ekalavya**

It is illuminating to reflect upon a celebrated fable from the Indian epic the *Mahabharata* (dated around 400 BC - AD 400) in light of the two sources that I draw on above. The tale can be read alternatively as an example of the devotion that a disciple must cultivate towards their master, *Guru-Bhakti*, (as it is commonly interpreted in orthodox Hindu thinking) or as a salutary warning to those who would transgress the divinely imposed social order. I make reference to it here because it is symptomatic of an exclusionary mindset which not only ostracises Dalits from the cosmic order but also rejects the legitimacy of Dalit participation in learning. Jadhav (2003) recounts the following version of the tale in the notes that accompany his autobiographical narrative 'Outcaste':

*"Ekalavya was a tribal boy, an outcaste from the social system, who eked out a living by hunting, fishing, and gathering fruits and berries. One day Ekalavya saw a group of young boys dressed in finery befitting royalty. He tried to befriend them, but was surrounded by four armed guards who roughed him up. They told him that the famed guru, Dronacharya, was teaching the*



*five Pandava princes the art of archery and warfare. If Ekalavya was ever seen again in the vicinity, they warned, he would be killed.*

*Ekalavya was humiliated and terrified, yet he mustered the courage to ask the guards if he could join the training, only to be brutally reminded that he was out of his league. How dare he think that the Guru who taught the princes would even talk to him?*

*Intrigued by the Guru-pupil relationship, Ekalavya began rising at dawn to furtively watch the training of the young princes. He would strain his ears to hear everything that was taught. By night, in the moonlight, he would practise archery, talking to himself, reciting the instructions he had heard the Guru utter. He soon mastered the art of archery, and was possessed by the desire to approach the Guru and show him his prowess.*

*One day the Guru saw Ekalavya shoot a deer that was bolting at lightening speed. Amazed at the precision of a young boy dressed in rags, the Guru questioned him. He was shocked when he realized that this boy was a tribal outcaste, who had mastered the art by listening to his teaching.*

*Ekalavya wanted to offer Guru-dakshina – the traditional gift offered to a teacher in gratitude. He offered to be his slave for as long as the Guru wished. The Guru then made a dramatic request. He asked Ekalavya for his right thumb as Guru-dakshina! Ekalavya was caught off guard. He had certainly not expected this. In his right thumb rested all the prowess of archery. Without his right thumb, he would never be an ace archer.*

*But Ekalavya calmly said that a Guru is equivalent to God and he would gladly do as the Guru wished. So saying, he severed his thumb and laid the bleeding stub at Dronacharya's feet.”*

*(p. 265)*

Attempting to facilitate Dalit participation in learning and education was never going to be a simple matter with a legacy such as this and it is no surprise that one of the rallying cries of the Dalit movement coined by Ambedkar was ‘Educate, unite and agitate’. A refrain which SAM have placed at the heart of their modus operandi (see Chapter Six).

## **Part Two: The Structural Impact of Caste-Consciousness: Institutionalising Varna**

In this section I look at certain aspects pertaining to the institutionalisation of caste. How has the theory of Varna practically placed limits on Dalit self-determination and how has it historically prevented Dalit’s from participating in learning. Essentially what I am exploring is the influence that the notion of Varna, as it is posited in the sources that I examine above, has had on the structural and institutional inequalities that Dalit communities face as excluded members of Hindu society. The phrase ‘excluded member’ might strike one as oxymoronic however, this is a peculiar feature of the caste system which authors such as Dumont (1980) and Deliege (1999) have pointed out, viz. that being a Dalit entails an ambiguity or paradox in that one is included in the overall Hindu schema and value system but only as an outcaste/excluded other. As we shall see below this is a fundamental issue that proponents of Dalit emancipation have had to grapple with – are Dalits Hindus and if so can they remain Hindu and yet reject the stigma of Untouchability?

The Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas (1952) and the French structural anthropologist L. Dumont (1980) both acknowledge that ‘Caste is an institution of great

complexity' (Srinivas, p. 265). Both also recognise that it is a popular misconception to conflate the fourfold (or fivefold if one includes the excluded Dalits) hierarchical division of the cosmos with the numerous endogamous sub-groups known as *Jatis*. And, as Dumont points out, one of the problems remains that the classical literature tends to talk about hierarchy in terms of Varna and many modern Hindus also speak of caste using the language of Varna.

Varna serves as a convenient All-India model on the basis of which the innumerable sub-castes (*Jatis*) subject to considerable regional diversity can be classified.

According to Srinivas, *Jatis* are small endogamous groups which practice hereditary occupations and 'enjoy a certain amount of cultural, ritual and juridical autonomy' (p. 265). However whilst it is invariably possible to determine anywhere in India which *Jatis* belong to the highest and lowest Varnas, it is not always possible to establish the Varnic position of those in between and disputes often arise. Dumont (1980) argues that:

"There is a tendency to sort the many castes in a given territory into the four classical categories (and the fifth, traditionally unnamed). However, there are regional peculiarities. Thus in the south there are scarcely any castes intermediate between Brahmanas [Brahmins] and Shudras; the warrior castes themselves are considered as part of the Shudras, and scarcely worry about this at all." (p. 73)

Furthermore the colonial decision to register castes in the decennial Censuses may well have played a part in the oversimplification process by forcing regional *Jatis* to 'artificially' fit into the Varnic categories taken as a pan-Indian classificatory framework.

As we have seen from Manu there are many symbolic markers (not just hereditary occupation) that serve to differentiate the castes by status including the type and location of their houses, the clothes that they are entitled to wear, customs, manners and rituals. Many sociologists and anthropologists have endeavoured to determine the value system that underpins the caste system. In a sense this quest for conceptual clarity is crucial for the Dalit emancipation movement precisely because it is so vital to understand (and refute) the ideological justification for exclusion and subjugation.

### ***Purity and Pollution***

Louis Dumont's structural anthropology provides a useful starting point. In *Homo Hierarchicus the Caste System and its Implications* (1980) he describes and illustrates in great detail what he regards as the fundamental structural principle underlying the hierarchical division of Hindu society. Dumont initially takes a definition of the caste system proffered by the French sociologist Bougle (1908) who identifies three ways in which castes, as hereditary groups are distinguished from one another, 1) by gradation of status or hierarchy; 2) by detailed rules aimed at ensuring their separation and 3) by division of labour and the interdependence which results from it. Dumont states:

“The three ‘principles’ rest on one fundamental conception and are reducible to a single true principle, namely the opposition of the pure and the impure. This opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure must likewise be kept separate. *The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites.*” (1980, p. 43)

It is this last point that, I believe is so important for beginning to think about the subjugation of Dalits (and the corresponding primacy of Brahmins). The Hindu cosmology is founded on the principle that the whole consists of the ‘necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites’ – order, balance and harmony are derived from the unquestionable supremacy (purity) of one segment of society and the unquestionable degeneracy (impurity) of another. This is something that comes across very starkly in Manu’s laws. Dumont writes:

“It is clear that the impurity of the Untouchables is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman. They must have been established together, or in any case have mutually reinforced each other, and we must get used to thinking of them together. In particular, Untouchability will not truly disappear until the purity of the Brahman is itself radically devalued.”

(1980, p. 54)

I return to the closing statement when I examine the role that the rejection of Hinduism/Brahminism plays in Dalit emancipation. The point that I wish to make here is that the potential for individual self-determination is severely restricted by a cosmology of this nature. If one’s impurity and location at the bottom of the social ladder (exclusion) is necessary for the smooth functioning of the whole one can assume that attempts to transgress this cosmic order by taking control of one’s own destiny will be subject to severe punishment. Freedom is therefore severely curtailed under the logic of Varna.

Dumont applies the fundamental and hierarchical opposition between purity and impurity to a range of institutions and practices in Hindu society. A decisive factor is

the extent to which pollution is said to occur from a practice, substance, institution or life stage. Pollution can be a temporary affair and easily remedied or a permanent affair and inescapable and there are complex rules and regulations which accompany this belief. Purity and pollution are closely connected with the organic functions of life and death and certain bodily substances are held to be ritually impure (semen, menstrual fluid, excreta, human hair). Dumont states:

“...the washerman and the barber are specialists in impurity, who, in virtue of their functions, find themselves living permanently in a state bordering upon that which the people they serve enter temporarily: a state which these people get out of thanks to, amongst other things, a terminal bath... Thus it is seen that, in the setting of the opposition between pure and impure, the religious division of labour goes hand in hand with the permanent attribution to certain professions of a certain level of impurity.” (1980, p. 48-9)

The central dichotomy between pure and impure, according to Dumont, governs who is entitled to marry who (caste is based upon endogamy and transgression results in impure relationship/offspring as we have seen from Manu). It determines what can be eaten, by whom and where (inter-caste dining is held to be anathema to many orthodox Hindus and certain foods are more polluting than others, whilst other foods are reserved for Brahmins because of their ritual purity). Purity/impurity also governs hereditary occupation, and who lives and moves where – Dalits are consigned to separate villages and not permitted to enter caste-Hindu temples because of their polluting presence.

Dumont has of course been criticised. One significant point made by both Deliege (1999) and Smith (2003) is that he is offering an abstract model of caste and therefore

we should be cautious of reification. Smith argues that ‘Much of Dumont’s argument is extreme, and cannot be supported by historical evidence’. (2003, p. 84) I am less concerned here with whether Dumont’s model accurately reflects the diversity of caste practices which can be empirically monitored, and more interested in the sense which this schema helps us to make of practical limitations placed on self-determination. If the regulatory principle does not apply to all castes in all regions of India it is, never the less, highly illuminating when we are thinking about the way that caste-based thinking might inhibit individual freedom.

The anthropologist Moffatt (1979) in his work *An Untouchable Community in South India. Structure and Consensus*, applies Dumont’s structuralism to his own ethnographic study of a Dalit community conducted in the Chingleput region of Tamil Nadu, not far from where SAM HQ is today located. Essentially his main argument is that the Dalits of South India have adopted the cultures, beliefs and values of Hinduism generally, and the caste system specifically. They have been co-opted into the hegemonic value system and therefore replicate and conform to the dominant discourse which perceives some human beings as systematically inferior to others on the basis of ritual purity/impurity. Dalits, on Moffatt’s account, do not have a unique and distinct conceptual system that can be differentiated from that held by the higher castes, but rather ideologically commit themselves to the hierarchical division of society, and thus participate in the cultural consensus. He refers to the ‘virtually identical cultural constructs’ that Dalits and higher caste actors hold and suggests that they ‘are in nearly total conceptual and evaluative consensus with one another’:

“The Harijans of Endavur are not [...] in a state of cultural or psychological removal from the cognitive orientations of the higher castes. They not only

share these orientations, but they appear to believe in them as strongly and unquestioningly as do those higher in the system.” (p. 291)

For example Moffatt has this to say about ranking and households:

“...the Untouchables of Endavur are not discernibly more egalitarian than the higher castes [...] To put the issue of rank among the Endavur Untouchables quantitatively, there exists in the Untouchable subset of the village a population of 109 households. This subset of the village is divided vertically into five castes, consisting of 5, 98, 2, 3, and 1 households, respectively (the Valluvar Pandarams, the Harijans, The Harijan Vannans, the Chakkiliyans, and the Kurivikarans). The largest of these castes is in turn divided into three ranked strata of 11, 48, and 39 households (the Talaiyari, Pannaikkar, and the Vettiyan grades, and the largest of the strata is internally divided in half by a ranked distinction (between “clean” and “dirty” Pannaikkars). There is no way that internal ranked differentiation of this degree can be said to reflect egalitarian values.” (p. 294-5)

Perhaps what Moffatt is objecting to here in the closing statement is the type of thinking evidenced in Pinto’s (2000) essay entitled *Culture, Values and Dalits in Higher Education* where he distinguishes between higher caste values of individualism and competition and Dalit belief in cooperation and communitarianism. However, the point that is relevant to the development of my argument in this thesis is that the strategy that SAM adopt towards Dalit emancipation is very much based upon a rejection, and an attempt to weaken the hold, of the dominant Hindu value system on Dalit consciousness. Dalit liberation and self-determination depend upon a critical self-reflection that scrutinises the cultural consensus which subjects them and



ultimately abandons it. As we shall see, this is very much a legacy of Ambedkarite thought.

Deliege (1999) makes a very perceptive point in his critique of Moffatt's work and argues that just because Dalits have little choice in conforming to the dominant culture, and therefore may replicate hierarchy in their formal and ritual practices, it does not mean that they have necessarily imbibed the value system that enslaves them – they do not necessarily consider themselves impure despite the fact that they follow similar customs and share certain aspects of their culture with higher caste society (language, deities, ritual etc). He suggests that a counter-ideology or counter-culture has perhaps been slow in emerging because Dalits are 'destitute, illiterate and divided' (p. 73) and not because they 'buy into' the dominant value system of graded purity/impurity. Interestingly he argues that a recent analysis of Dalit myths of origin indicates:

“...that, contrary to Moffatt's interpretation, Untouchable's attribute their own debased position to a mistake, some sort of trickery, or accident, and therefore consider it undeserved. In fact, Untouchable's call themselves *tazhttaoattor*, 'those who are forced to be low', and they do not accept the idea that their caste is inherently low. The model of caste hierarchy held by Harijans is that of a humanly instituted order in which they find themselves in an undeservedly low position as a consequence of misfortune, historical accident or trickery.” (Ibid.)

This assertion again serves as a useful contextual basis for understanding the way that some individuals and organisations reflect upon Dalit liberation. It has resonance with the very usage of the word Dalit (broken, crushed) to mobilise a counter-ideology

against a system which perceives ‘Untouchability’ as a natural aspect of the divine order. It is a starting point for orienting self-determination because it aims to throw off the shackles of an oppressive ideology. And as Aloysisus (1998) states:

“The primary meaning of any kind of emancipation is self-determination.”

(p. 158)

I believe that we could see this disagreement between Moffatt and Deliege not as a fundamental and irreconcilable problem with how one categorises the structural position of Dalits vis-à-vis the dominant value system but as different stages in the level of consciousness relating to that value system. Perhaps one could argue that it is critical self-reflection – the inward turn that forces an evaluation of the belief system which one, as a Dalit is oppressed by, that marks the point of transition between uncritical acceptance of the dominant value system (Moffatt and the cultural consensus thesis) and re-appraisal/rejection of that value system.

### **Internalising the Dominant Paradigm of Submission**

One of the most intractable problems that organisations like Social Action Movement face is in challenging the perceptions of Dalits ‘...who have internalised the logic of caste oppression and hope for an improvement in their life through the largesse of the upper castes’ (Racine and Racine, 1998 p. 6) rather than by challenging the very structures and institutions that perpetuate their inferior position. Srinivas (1952) points to two notions which might serve to deepen the extent to which the dominant paradigm of submission is internalised. The first, mentioned above, is the notion of Dharma, the second is the doctrine of Karma. Dharma, as we have seen, is a moral code that requires one to live in accordance with certain pre-ordained and established patterns of existence. Srinivas notes:

“A [person] who accepts the caste system and the rules of [their] particular sub-caste is living according to Dharma, while a [person] who questions them is violating Dharma. Living according to Dharma is rewarded, while violation of Dharma is punished. If [they] observe the rules of Dharma, [they] will be born in [their] next incarnation in a high caste, rich, whole and well endowed. If [they do] not observe them [they] will be born in a low caste, poor deformed and ill endowed.” (p. 267)

This last observation refers to the idea of Karma that one is born into a particular caste because one deserves it, and one deserves it because of the type of life (virtuous or deviant) one has lived in previous incarnations. Dalit activists argue that both of these doctrines have a profoundly limiting impact upon Dalit consciousness and vigorously work to prevent emancipatory ambition. If one is a Dalit and believes in Dharma and Karma one is faced with a stark choice – put up with the submissive life that one has been born into or risk being reincarnated in an even more disadvantaged position. It is this acquiescent mindset that organisations like SAM struggle so hard to transform.

Racine and Racine (1998) in their paper *Dalit Identities and the Dialectics of Oppression and Emancipation in a Changing India: The Tamil Case and Beyond* tell Viramma’s story to illustrate the paradoxical quality of Dalit existence and the problem of internalising the logic of caste:

“Viramma is a Paraiyar [a Dalit sub-caste from Tamil Nadu that has bequeathed the word pariah to the English language] whose daily life revolves around her family, hard work and caste culture. But as “one has to fill one’s belly,” Viramma’s life also centres on the patronage of the main local landlord to whom she has become attached under the traditional bondage link between

the master and his *adimai* [denoting patron-client relationship]. Viramma sees this status as one combining dependence and a degree of protection, for the master is her usual recourse in case of necessity, particularly when money has to be borrowed to meet the costs of important occasions: funerals, weddings and other ceremonies in the family.” (p. 6)

Significantly Viramma does not challenge the dominant concepts of Karma and Dharma, believing that ‘things are better ‘when everyone is in [their] own place’ (p. 7) and this has brought her into conflict with her son who belongs to a younger generation (perhaps influenced by movements like Social Action Movement) that ‘questions the rationality of God’s discriminations, and condemns the exploitation of Dalits by the dominant castes’ (p. 7). As we shall see in subsequent chapters it is the kind of transformation in consciousness that is indicated in the discrepancy between the way that Viramma and her son think that is so crucial to the Dalit emancipation movement. In discussing the work of Ambedkar, Periyar and others below I examine the particular tools that are used to effect this transformation, the most salient of which is the promotion of critical self-reflection.

So far I have attempted to show how the notion of Varna and the structural principle that underpins this generalised idea, as expressed by particular sociologists and anthropologists, limits Dalit freedom by shaping consciousness and imposing particular practices and modes of living. I have also introduced into the argument the potential role that critical self-reflection might play in reformulating Dalit consciousness. I now wish to turn to a more detailed examination of how this mode of thought – the hegemonic value system (Varna and graded inequality) has influenced a particular aspect of Indian life – namely education. I am interested in how hierarchical

thinking and separation based upon purity/impurity has impacted upon schooling and learning in such a way that Dalits have been prevented from meaningful participation.

## **Caste and Barriers to Dalit Participation in Learning**

Yagati (2002) in an essay exploring education and identity among Dalits in colonial Andhra confirms that:

“The ancient law-giver Manu, prescribed that the education of Shudra children was an offence, and this doctrine worked vigorously till about the end of the nineteenth century. The denial of education to Dalits perpetuated their social humiliation, economic exploitation, political marginalisation and cultural subordination.” (p. 88)

We can turn to an extract from Valmiki’s autobiographical tale for an illustration of how this denial of education, or refusal to countenance the value of Dalit learning, operated well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and indeed continues to operate despite legislative attempts to improve access. Valmiki recounts:

*“The ideal image of the teachers that I saw in my childhood has remained indelibly imprinted on my memory. Whenever someone starts talking about a great guru, I remember all those teachers who used to swear about mothers and sisters. They used to fondle good-looking boys and invite them to their homes and sexually abuse them.*

*One day the headmaster Kaliram called me to his room and asked: ‘Abbey, what is your name?’*

*‘Omprakash,’ I answered slowly and fearfully. Children used to feel scared just encountering the headmaster. The entire school was terrified of him.*

*‘Chuhre [untouchable caste] ka?’ Headmaster threw his second question at me.*

*‘Ji.’*

*‘All right...see that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation.*

*Go...get to it.’*

*Obedying Headmaster’s orders, I cleaned all the rooms and the verandas. Just as I was about to finish, he came to me and said, ‘After you have swept the rooms, go and sweep the playground.’*

*The playground was way larger than my small physique could handle and in cleaning it my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. Dust had gone inside my mouth. The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. Headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me. I was not even allowed to get a drink of water. I swept the whole day. I had never done so much work, being the pampered one among my brothers.*

*The second day, as soon as I reached school, Headmaster again put me to sweeping the school. I swept the whole day. I was consoling myself that I will go back to the class from tomorrow.*

*The third day I went to the class and sat down quietly. After a few minutes the headmaster’s loud thundering was heard: ‘Abbey Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding...your mother...’*

*I had begun to shake uncontrollably. A Tyagi [higher caste] boy shouted, ‘Master Saheb, there he is, sitting in the corner.’*

*The headmaster had pounced on my neck. The pressure of his fingers was increasing. As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged me out of the class*

*and threw me on the ground. He screamed: 'Go sweep the whole playground...Otherwise I will shove chillies up your arse and throw you out of the school.'*

*Frightened, I picked up the three-day-old broom. Just like me, it was shedding its dried up leaves. All that remained were the thin sticks. Tears were falling from my eyes. I started to sweep the compound while my tears fell. From the doors and windows of the schoolrooms, the eyes of the teachers and the boys saw the spectacle. Each pore of my body was submerged in an abyss of anguish.”*<sup>2</sup> (2003, p. 4-5)

In Valmiki's extract we see the operation of the exclusionary logic of Varna and the laws of Manu Dharma in full effect. A Dalit child is an impure child and certainly not legitimately entitled to participate in learning. He/she is fit only for the menial chores befitting their position in the hierarchical ordering of society and any attempts to contravene this divinely ordained schema is met with immediate retribution from those who occupy the higher echelons. Both Dalit self-determination and participation in learning are restricted by the operation of this principle. It is my contention in this thesis that what is required for both Dalit emancipation and participation in learning is a 'newly meaningful symbol-belief system' (Aloysius, 1998) since one based upon the graded inequality of human beings will facilitate neither.

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<sup>2</sup> Although Valmiki is recounting an episode from his childhood the ritual humiliation of Dalits continues to occur today and is a significant barrier to participation in learning for children from Untouchable communities. The Headmaster's threat of shoving chillies up Valmiki's arse was not an idle one. The March-April 2003 edition of *the Dalit*, a now defunct English language Dalit Media Network publication, contains an article about a 20 year old man from a Dalit community in Andhra Pradesh who was accused of stealing diesel. It notes "The instant punishment meted by Shudra Reddys [servant caste]: a stick smeared in chilli powder was pierced half-feet deep through his anus, his intestines split, and he bled profusely." (p. 22).

Although Manu's Laws are the paradigmatic example of Vedic refusal to countenance the value of education for the lower echelons of society, other texts provide startling illustration of just how seriously this belief was held and enforced. The Gautam Dharma Sutra held that a Dalit who heard the Vedas being recited should have molten tin poured in their ears, if they recited Vedic scripture they should have their tongue cut out (Jadhav, 2003). Education was therefore the preserve of a privileged few and the inequality that 'became a structural feature of the traditional Hindu value system' (Yagati, 2002, p. 87) underscored the opportunities for, and barriers to, participation in learning that existed in pre-British India. Yagati states:

“Formal education, or for that matter any kind of education was for more than one reason seen as necessary and more or less limited only to the dwijas (twice-born castes). The Brahmin, who was engaged with classical religious texts, interpreted and communicated them to the illiterate masses in their local dialects. The Kshatriyas had to learn to rule and get acquainted with weapons, statecraft and organisational matters, and some schooling for this purpose was necessary. The Vaishyas required the knowledge of arithmetic to transact business, keep records and maintain accounts. The sorts of skills necessary to practice their crafts at the domestic level could well be acquired within the home by the artisan groups or Shudras. So the Untouchables were the only section of society left without access to education of any kind.” (p. 87-88)

Securing Dalit participation in learning is therefore a profoundly important symbolic resistance to the value system that subjugates them. It is a pivotal aspect of emancipation because the message that is communicated is that Dalit's have a right to learn. It is a right that goes far deeper than say Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child because it seeks to overturn a dominant value system which is



premised upon the idea that Dalits should not be allowed to learn. It is in this sense that Dalit participation in learning could potentially be the key to liberation if that education furnishes them with the capacity to critically reflect upon the circumstances of their oppression and provides opportunities for self-determination and instilling a more liberated consciousness (as critical theorists like Paulo Freire assert that education should do).

## **Part Three: The Changing Dynamics of Caste: Dalit**

### **Education, Colonialism and Independence**

If systematic inequality based upon graded purity/impurity dictated who was furnished with an education in India for many centuries, certain forces and historical developments have served to re-constitute the hold that Varna and caste have exerted. A host of complex issues and events are relevant here and a detailed exploration is well beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless I point to some particularly important issues that have strengthened, weakened or changed the influence that caste-based thinking has had on education in particular and the status of Dalits more generally.

#### **Colonialism**

Firstly, British rule in India affected not only the practice and delivery of education but also the ethos that lay behind it – the inherent value and purpose of education as conceived by the colonial hegemony. Bhattacharya (2002) argues that with colonialism came a devaluing of indigenous knowledge systems and a corresponding attribution of ‘cognitive authority’ to metropolitan western culture. English became

the official language in courts of law and for administration of the colony. Pre-colonial education was heavily influenced by the Vedic tradition which conceived learning as the transmission of ‘sacred’ wisdom from guru to pupil. It was a system of education that valued personal development and self-determination if only for a highly restricted and privileged strata of society. With the advent of colonial rule arrogant assumptions about English/Western racial, cultural and intellectual superiority coupled political and economic domination with the delegitimisation of local knowledge systems. This is clearly evidenced in Thomas Macaulay’s famous ‘Minute of 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1835 on Indian Education’, which he wrote whilst serving on the Supreme Council of India between 1834 and 1838. He states:

“But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded, and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say, that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England. In every branch of physical or moral philosophy, the relative position of the two nations is nearly the same.”

(Text available online:

[www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/rraley/research/english/macaulay.html](http://www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/rraley/research/english/macaulay.html))

Such thinking led to what Bhattacharya refers to as the cognitive authority of western culture and the privileging of English as a medium of instruction. Indeed in 1837 English was made the language of administration and when in 1844 a government resolution threw subordinate administrative positions open to Indians a rapid expansion of English education took place. The purpose of education therefore shifted

under colonial rule. Rote learning and the capacity to speak English - skills necessary for the administration of empire replaced traditional models of Vedic learning.

However, as Bhattacharya points out, asymmetries in access to education continued to be heavily influenced by caste – primarily it was Brahmins that availed themselves of opportunities for education and employment under the colonial authority, he concludes:

“...by and large the distinction between the privileged and the disprivileged communities remained intact and was possibly reinforced by unequal access to educational institutions sponsored or mandated by the state in that period [...] The appropriation of the new knowledge system imported from Europe was easier for those already privileged and thus, regardless of motives of the actors or agents, a process was in motion re-establishing an old inequality on a new basis.” (2002, p. 10)

One might argue that with such historical developments the influence that Varna had on access to learning and education changed. On one hand there was a devaluation of existing knowledge systems, knowledge systems which operated according to the iniquitous logic of Varna. And yet on the other hand the colonial administration reinforced existing caste inequalities by privileging a certain type of education for a certain strata of Indian society who ended up in ‘...relatively key positions in the lower rungs of the colonial bureaucratic structure’ (Bhattacharya , 2002, p. 8).

### ***Missionary activity***

If economic and political colonisation affected Indian education in a number of ways new ideas and value systems seeped into India with missionary activity and this too helps us to put Social Action Movement in a richer contextual framework. Charitable

educational institutions were set up which aimed at providing a rudimentary schooling for the underprivileged and when new opportunities for participation in learning were opened up conversions to Christianity ensued. School often became a locus for the propagation of value systems which challenged the Hindu hegemony and Varna based thinking. Quite apart from transgressing caste laws which dictated that Dalits should not learn, participation in learning meant a window onto a new value system, one which, although evangelising, suggested new modes of thinking and being. When, for example, missionaries provided relief for destitute Dalits during a particularly bad famine (1876-9) in The Madras Presidency or when the twenty or so philanthropic missions that existed by the end of the nineteenth century in the Presidency added schools and colleges to their churches with a view to social reform, serious challenges were mounted to the prevailing cosmology based on graded inequality. Whilst I would not choose to express this quite as Yagati does (she argues that “Through this process, the missions introduced the humanistic element of Western civilisation to the natives” (2002, p. 94), we do see certain ideas creeping in which were anathema to Varnic thinking, namely the possibility that Dalits might have some inherent value as individual human beings (providing, of course, that they leave their heathen religion and embrace Christianity).

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century certain new developments did take place which perhaps indicated a change in governmental thinking vis-à-vis Dalit education.

Thomas Munro (Governor of the Madras Presidency 1820-27), after realising that literacy was confined to the Brahmins, conducted a survey in each district which attempted to ascertain the caste background of students and teachers in addition to the medium of instruction and the type of learning that was imparted. Perhaps the primacy of Brahmins and virtual exclusion of Dalits in the survey data (Brahmins

consisted of 60-75% of the pupils) had as much to do with the fact that the survey was carried out by Brahmins who would have been reluctant to enter Dalit hamlets and count a sizeable segment of the population. Never-the-less the important point is that Munro had begun to think about iniquities in the distribution of educational opportunities in his Presidency – something which the Laws of Manu not only permitted but positively condoned.

Other later attempts to patronise popular education by the colonial government such as Wood's 1854 despatch also challenged Hindu orthodoxy. Charles Wood (Director of Public Instruction) not only advocated the establishment of a separate department of education, teacher training institutes, the expansion of elementary education and the gradual transfer of educational management to local bodies (all aspects of contemporary Indian education policy), he also expounded:

“...the importance of placing the means of acquiring useful and practical knowledge within reach of the great mass of the people.”

This, according to Wood meant instruction not only in English but also vernacular language although English was to be the medium of instruction in higher education and notwithstanding the fact that ‘...emphatically...the objective of education remained the diffusion of...European knowledge.’ Again, this demonstrates that certain beliefs and values bequeathed by the colonial administration served to challenge the Vedic approach to social order and accordingly the opportunities that existed for the participation in learning of the lowest echelons of society. I find it difficult to characterise these as liberal, humanitarian values (as Yagati does) because they contain the seeds of an arrogant assumption about the primacy of European thought, and therefore substitute one notion of supremacy and justified subjugation

for another. However, and this is the important point for the development of my thesis, by opening up opportunities for participation in learning to hitherto excluded groups the potential for critical self-reflection and self-determination is greatly enhanced. Even if the type of education was of the most rudimentary kind and did little to stimulate critical reflection, the very fact that some colonialists were beginning to countenance the possibility of educating the masses represented an enormous challenge to Vedic wisdom and therefore it laid the foundation for potentially new modes of Dalit being and consciousness.

It would be excessively simplistic to argue, on the strength of such observations, that British Rule exclusively served to weaken the authority of Varna-based thinking. Indeed, as Corbridge and Harriss (2000) point out, British policies of enumeration, divide and rule exemplified by the introduction of the decennial Census of India (1872) which imposed rigid caste and religious categorisations served to harden and simplify caste distinctions. They state:

“The blunt categories of caste and religion which feature in the Census of British India were not designed to respect the particularities of *jati*, and nor were they attentive to the possibility of forms of religious affiliation, like *bhakti* cults or *Sufism*, that cut across the boundaries between ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Islam’. The colonial authorities then sought to build upon these brute categories by linking the (slow) evolution of representative government to the award of separate electorates and reserved seats for Muslims and Hindus.”

(p. 8)

By linking political interests with caste and religious affiliation the potential for sectarian conflict (such as the huge levels of violence that flared during partition) was

increased but so too were calls for self-determination – India's religious and caste identities had been politicised. And within the broader struggle for independence a host of smaller battles were waged. Jinnah's Muslim league refused to accept that Nehru's Congress party in control of a unified India would protect Muslim interests and Ambedkar refused to accept a system of government that would alienate India's depressed classes and advocated a separate electorate for Dalits. Identities may have hardened with vested interests at stake but once again the potential for critical self-reflection and self-determination was enhanced. Inequality may have been perpetuated by British Rule, different forms of subjugation may have been introduced, but the imposition of new modes of thought and practices did challenge the Hindu cosmology which held that certain human beings were to be excluded from society and learning owing to circumstances of birth.

### **Indian Independence – Liberty and Self-Determination For All?**

Another enormously important series of developments relating to Dalit participation in learning and emancipation occur as a result of independence. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to enter into the very complex issue of the struggle for self-rule in India. However by looking at the constitution that came into force in 1950, and the ideas that provided the motor force, we can clearly discern some very significant challenges to Manu Dharma which, again, have served to open up the possibility for Dalit emancipation and enhance opportunities for Dalit participation in learning. And, although Dalits continue to face oppression and many difficulties in accessing formal learning, a variety of constitutional rights and commitments further weaken the legitimacy of a system of values which impose hierarchy based upon graded purity/impurity.

The constitution of India has, at its core, a firm commitment to a set of ideas which are commonly associated with Enlightenment thought and modern, liberal humanitarian values. The pre-amble reads thus:

“WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVERIGN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure all citizens:

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith or worship;

EQUALITY of status and opportunity;

And to promote them all;

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation;

IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November 1949, do HEARBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION.”

(Text available online: <http://indiacode.nic.in/coiweb>)

These principles are diametrically opposed to the pre-modern notion of Varna and the logic of caste which, in conjunction with the detrimental impact of British rule, were held by Indian nationalists such as Nehru to be responsible for Indian backwardness. As Caroline Dyer (2002) points out for these very reasons modern India was to be a secular state in which all citizens regardless of religion, sex, caste or place of birth would be free from arbitrary discrimination ‘in matters of public employment or access to publicly funded education.’ (p. 16).

If we consider some of the pertinent articles of the constitution we see these principles in operation. Article 14 enshrines the notion of equality of all before the law, whilst



Article 15, clause one prohibits state discrimination on a number of grounds including caste and clause two dictates that no citizen shall be ‘subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition’ with regard to access to shops, public restaurants, hotels, places of public entertainment or the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of state funds or dedicated to the use of the general public’.

Of profound importance is Article 17, which states:

“Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of Untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.”

The practice of Untouchability is not only delegitimised but also criminalised. Article 19 further denigrates some of the central tenets of Varna by stating that all citizens have the right to freedom of speech and expression, to move freely throughout the territory of India, to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India and crucially to practice any profession or to carry on any occupation, trade or business. Such provisions undermine the notion of hereditary occupation and segregated dwelling which proponents of Varna such as Manu were so keen to enforce.

In addition to generalised commitments to the principle of egalitarianism the constitution also highlights the importance of providing free, compulsory and universal education in Article 45, flying in the face of Manu’s stringent prohibition of learning for the lower echelons of society:

“The state shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children.”

Article 46 extends this commitment by linking it to the promotion of Dalit participation in learning:

“The state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.”

This reference to ‘Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes’ is an important legacy of both the colonial government and the constitution of India. In 1935 the British passed the Government of India Act designed to give the Indian provinces greater autonomy and set up a national federal structure. The Act introduced the idea that certain seats should be reserved for a segment of society that the colonial power had previously identified as ‘depressed classes’. The term ‘Scheduled Caste’ was used to refer to:

“Such castes, races or tribes or parts of groups within groups, races or tribes, which appear to His Majesty in Council to correspond to the classes of persons formerly known as the “Depressed Classes”, as His Majesty in Council may prefer”.

In 1936 this somewhat vague definition was clarified in *The Government of India (Scheduled Caste) Order* which drew up a list, or ‘schedule’, of such castes.

Essentially the constitution accepted the nomenclature and ethos of the Act and (under articles 341 and 342) gave the president and governors not only the responsibility of

compiling a full list of castes and tribes but also the power to edit this list as required. Many Dalit activists reject this officially sanctioned and sanitised discourse precisely because it not only places the right to arbitrarily decide which castes find their way on to the schedule in the hands of the ruling elite, but also because the term fails to communicate their systematic subjugation with the directness of the word 'Dalit' meaning broken or crushed.

***Reservation and other caste-based incentives: has the dominant paradigm of submission entered through the back door?***

Articles 243, 330, and 332 constitutionally enshrine the principle of reservation which, essentially allocates to, or reserves a percentage of seats or places in local and national government and institutions of further education for members of certain Dalit and Tribal groups. This violates the very essence of Varna which holds that particular segments of the social order are to be prevented from accessing positions of power on the basis of their birth.

It could be argued that the constitution of modern India turns Manu's codification on its head. Liberty, equality, justice, fraternity are the central tenets of a society which, to coin Dumont's phrase, privilege *Homo Aequalis* the equal human being. In contradistinction we have Manu's *Homo Hierarchicus* the hierarchical, or unequal human being whose significance lies in being a cog in a vastly more important ranked cosmic schema.

The central question seems to be that if the practice of Untouchability is constitutionally prohibited and egalitarianism is a founding principle of modern India, why and how does it still persist? It is my contention in this thesis that not enough has

been done to weaken the hold that Varna and caste have on the mind. To affect a shift in consciousness the problem of inequality has to be tackled at a far deeper level than rhetoric, one has to perceive the moral bankruptcy of evaluating human beings on the basis of caste.

It is illuminating to look at some of the practices and policies that have been developed on the strength of the constitutional commitment to equity and anti-discriminatory justice. I will pay particular attention to two which seem to indicate that although the stated objective of the policy/practice is to diminish discrimination and advance the opportunities of excluded or marginalised segments of society, the conceptual and linguistic framework potentially serves to entrench the caste mindset.

### ***Reservation and the Mandal Commission***

The first policy is the constitutional commitment to reservation - a system of positive discrimination in favour of those castes who had been traditionally excluded from mainstream society and authority. Constitutionally speaking, equality of opportunity is recognised for the individual, however to counteract centuries of inequality certain groups are entitled to benefit from protective and preferential practices (reservation) to:

“...create conditions for the social advancement of the historically disadvantaged groups, their integration into mainstream society, and participation in its opportunity structure on equal terms with the advanced groups.”  
(Radhakrishnan (1996), p. 203)

One particularly inflammatory attempt to promote the idea of reservation was the Mandal commission. It was the second of two commissions appointed by the

president under Article 340 of the constitution to investigate the conditions of what the Article refers to as the 'socially and educationally backward classes'. Set up in January 1979, the second commission was named after its chair B.P Mandal the former chief minister of Bihar and it became infamous because of the extreme levels of violence it provoked. The commission aimed at identifying those castes that were educationally and socially disadvantaged but were not specified in the official 'Schedule' of castes recognised by the constitution. A number of recommendations were made for the 'advancement' of certain castes that were identified as OBC or 'Other Backward Castes'. These included reservation of 27% of jobs in central services, public sector undertakings under the Central and State governments, nationalised banks, universities and affiliated colleges, government aided firms in the private sector and state governments. 27% seats in all government run scientific, technical and professional institutions. This figure of 27% was in addition to the 22.5% reservation of seats for those Dalit castes identified in the 'Schedule' and implementing these recommendations would have resulted in a significant number of seats being reserved for some of the most marginalised members of society.

The Mandal report was submitted in December 1980 although it was not implemented until 1990 by Prime Minister V.P. Singh in a politically expedient move aimed at securing support for his party amongst those castes who stood to benefit from it. This had a 'predictable' effect according to Corbridge and Harriss (2000), resulting in violent anti-reservation riots which saw upper-caste students self-immolating as well as intellectual debate about the efficacy and or legitimacy of reservation. The key point for the development of this thesis, however, is the fact that some critics argued that reservation based upon caste rather than economic disadvantage served to perpetuate caste distinction rather than diminish its adverse consequences:

“Critics held, like some of the members of the first Backward Classes Commission indeed, nearly forty years before, that the policy of reservation on caste lines served only to enhance the significance of caste categories, and so to exacerbate or to create conflicts; they argued that the policy was discriminatory and incompatible with efficiency which, in public services, is in the longer-run interests especially of poorer people in Indian society [...] and they held that the policy, anyway, mainly benefits those better-off amongst the lower castes, not the truly disadvantaged, whether from higher or lower castes.” (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000, p. 128)

The relative merit and demerit of reservation is of course problematic. Some, like Radhakrishnan (1996) see its justification as self-evident given the social and educational disadvantage that some communities have historically faced. Others, like Shah (1996) suggest that reservation compromises efficiency and meritocratic achievement.

My primary criticism of reservation based on caste is that it locks Dalits into a dependency on their excluded identity in-order to gain access to certain social and educational benefits thereby reinforcing the symbolic significance of caste distinction. The problem is compounded because any resistance to an untouchable identity in the form of conversion to another religion results in the loss of access to these benefits. The message is simple – remain within the Hindu fold and receive help – leave the fold and lose your right to reservations. Power continues to be wielded over Dalits by the dominant Hindu hegemony through such welfare measures and arguably this is tantamount to Dharma and Karma by stealth. Self-determination is severely restricted and the logic of Varna is kept in place by perpetuating the caste mindset in this way.

### *Educational Incentives*

In the field of education there are similar problems – state and national governments offer incentives and paternalistic welfare measures based upon caste membership which arguably strengthen rather than diminish caste identity. In Chapter Seven I take a closer look at some of the incentives that are used by government to encourage Dalit participation in learning but here it is worth noting that free materials, uniforms and scholarships all depend upon the production of a Scheduled Caste Certificate and this ensures that Dalits remain dependent upon their inferior status. Rejecting ones Dalit status means forgoing certain benefits.

This is a serious problem for the Dalit emancipation movement because such schemes, like the system of reservation, perpetuate the caste mindset. Furthermore, they may have the perverse effect of encouraging some groups to positively demand recognition as Scheduled Caste Hindus to access the benefits that accrue. As Lynch (1969) states ‘part of the definition of a member of the Scheduled Castes is that [they are] a Hindu’ and this is something that Social Action Movement are desperate to deny as we shall see in subsequent chapters. By linking marginalised caste membership with access to socio-economic incentives a culture of dependency upon caste and Hindu identity is created. This not only opens up the possibility for the type of caste-based animosity that was generated around the Mandal commission but also locks Dalits into the dominant paradigm of submission and dependency. One of the primary concerns of the Dalit emancipation movement is to demolish this culture of dependency on caste identity by stimulating critical reflection which leads to the consciousness of oppression. Reservation and caste-based incentives act as an opiate – dulling the pain of caste oppression by conferring certain privileges on the lower

echelons and therefore inhibiting the desire to resist caste categorisation. It was one of the original architects of the constitution of India, the Dalit leader Dr Ambedkar, once himself a staunch advocate of reservation, who offered a powerful critique along similar lines. He saw the rejection of Hinduism and the caste mindset as the only practicable solution to caste oppression. The systematic rejection of caste consciousness and Hindu cosmology is perhaps nowhere as forcefully expounded as in the work of Dr Ambedkar, however these ideas have their origin in far older philosophies.

## **Part Four: Challenging the Caste Mindset**

In this section I consider some of the ideas and philosophies that have been developed and propagated to critique either specifically the caste system and the practice of Untouchability, or more generally Hindu religion. Many of these ideas have become central planks in the strategies adopted by Dalit liberation organisations in their quest for freedom and self-determination. I examine ideas that have been instrumental in stimulating the work of groups like SAM as well as ideas that have been rejected by the Dalit liberation movement because, arguably, they do not sufficiently promote what many would regard as the crucial ingredient for emancipation i.e. self-determination based upon a critical consciousness of oppression.

Aloysius (1998) in his exploration of Tamil Buddhism as an emancipatory identity sets out, in Freirean terms, why this is so important:

“Consciousness of oppression, first of all, indicates an epistemological shift.

All things social appear to the oppressed under a new light: they themselves



become a homogeneous collectivity, unjustly subordinated and subjugated; the various social phenomena hitherto accepted as neutral, given, or having thing-like quality, now appear as emanations of exploitative social relations; the society itself is viewed as constitutive of two groups, the oppressor and the oppressed, locked in conflict [...] consciousness of oppression is also an urge, a will, towards change in social praxis. It is an uneasy and disturbing consciousness demanding action on the part of the oppressed, to grapple with this 'new found fact' of oppression.” (p. 7)

Buddhism represented an early example of just such an epistemological shift. It served to critique received Brahminic wisdom by challenging the view that one's spiritual merit is determined by birth into a particular caste. The Buddha, according to the following verses from the Dhammapada, saw spiritual merit as something one achieves according to the extent that one liberates oneself from selfish desire:

“It is not matted hair nor birth that makes a Brahmin, but truth and the love of life with which one's heart is full. What use is matted hair? What use is a deerskin on which to sit for meditation, if your mind still seethes with lust? Saffron robe and outward show do not make a Brahmin, but training of the mind and senses through practice of meditation. Neither riches nor high caste make a Brahmin. Free yourself from selfish desires, and you will become a Brahmin.” (Easwaran, 1987, p 196 v. 393-396)

Here we see a classic example of subversion of the dominant symbol system by explicitly stating that the symbol is neither necessary nor sufficient for spiritual value. The trade marks of religiosity the matted hair, saffron robes and deerskin mats which are still symbols of asceticism in contemporary India do not make a Brahmin, neither

do riches or birth into a high caste. Such ideas represent a radical challenge to the prevailing epistemological assumption that merit is ascriptive and human value/privilege can be determined according to the hierarchical principle of Varna. 2,500 years ago, well before Enlightenment notions of individual liberty and equality had surfaced in India, such ideas would have been revolutionary and would have sought to affect a monumental shift in human consciousness. It is at this level that I believe one must mount a challenge to the caste system. To paraphrase Aloysius the once authoritative and integrative values must be shown to be increasingly powerless and irrelevant. Beliefs, myths and rituals, which were once presumed to give universal meaning, must be revealed as sectarian and hollow. Attempting to instil a critical consciousness in the minds of Dalit children aims at precisely this, attempting to furnish children from a highly selective list of deprived castes with educational incentives is, in comparison, mere tokenism.

### **Dr Ambedkar – the Iconic Dalit Leader**

On April 14<sup>th</sup> 1891 Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born into a Mahar community – the largest Dalit caste in Maharashtra (traditionally employed as village servants and menial labourers). Ambedkar was the last of fourteen children and was fortunate to have had a father who, having served in the Indian army; was able to secure his children access to the local government school. The importance that his father attached to educating his children indubitably had an enduring impact upon Ambedkar's life and works and he went on to pursue higher studies in many disciplines including law, economics and politics. His education, and the fact that he secured sponsorship from enlightened benefactors, enabled him to pursue learning opportunities well beyond the scope of what was available to most Dalits in India at

the time (he studied at both Columbia University, New York and the London School of Economics). However, as Lynch (1969) points out:

“His earlier school years were not without experiences which branded the stigma of being an Untouchable on his mind. He was made to sit in a corner of the class separate from other students. For fear of pollution his teachers would not touch him or even ask for a recitation. And, like an armless beggar, water was poured into his mouth from above, lest his lips touch and pollute the container.”

(p. 131)

During the 1920s and 30s Ambedkar carved out a career in politics. In 1926 he became a nominated member of the Bombay Legislative Council and soon after launched active movements against the practice of Untouchability. The emphasis was very much on subverting the powerful symbols associated with the notions of ritual purity and pollution. However, although Ambedkar agitated for equal access to public water sources or entry into Hindu temples, he was very much aware that Dalit liberation required much more than simply opening up these prohibited ‘public’ spaces. He also sought a politicised voice and collective identity and fought hard to establish a separate electorate for Dalits during the increasingly turbulent years that marked the death throes of British Rule in India. The self-determination of Dalits and their independence from not only the British but also the mainstream Indian political parties like Congress was imperative for Ambedkar. In a paper written in 1943 entitled ‘Mr Gandhi and the emancipation of the Untouchables’ he writes:

“The Hindu social system which places communities one above the other is a factor which is bound to have its effect on the result of voting. By the Hindu social system the communities are placed in an ascending scale of reverence

and a descending scale of contempt. It needs no prophet to predict what effect these social attitudes will have on voting.” (p. 8)

In 1929 the British government had held a series of ‘Round Table Conferences’ to discuss the problems of a new constitution in India and Ambedkar was nominated as representative of what were then referred to as the ‘depressed classes’. It was during these series of discussions that the infamous enmity between Gandhi and Ambedkar became particularly pronounced. The former strongly opposed the idea of a separate electorate for Dalits because it would irreparably divide the unified Hindu community he deemed necessary to galvanise an Independent India. In 1932, when the British announced the Communal Award, which granted separate seats for Dalits in Provincial Assemblies and enabled them to elect their own representatives as well as cast their vote in general constituencies, Gandhi voiced his opposition by embarking upon a ‘fast unto death’. Ambedkar was vilified and, fearing violent reprisals against Dalits, acquiesced by signing the Poona Pact which facilitated reservation but not a separate electorate.

In 1942 ‘Ambedkar decided to consolidate and nationalise his Dalit leadership credentials and founded the All-India Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) at a conference in Nagpur. The SCF served as a vehicle for Ambedkar to communicate his ideological convictions that Dalits were a separate and distinct group in the Indian population and needed to agitate for basic economic and social rights to facilitate self-determination and emancipation. It is these ideas, which I turn to now, that help us make sense of the work of organisations like Social Action Movement.

### ***Ambedkar's ideological convictions***

Ambedkar wrote voluminously and addressed an enormous range of historical, sociological and religious issues. I have therefore had to be highly selective of the works that I have used here to represent his ideas. A more thoroughgoing analysis of this thought would of course demand wider reading. I have attempted to narrow the focus by highlighting two important areas where Ambedkar's ideas can be shown to adumbrate the beliefs and values which drive the work of SAM.

***Instilling a critical consciousness:*** For India's Dalits to have any hope of emancipation Ambedkar believed that the Dalits themselves would have to realise the circumstances of their own oppression and this required a sustained effort to free the mind. Caste was a system of exploitation that operated at the cultural and ideological level. Although Ambedkar was influenced by Marxist doctrines which viewed the inherent class conflict at the heart of capitalism as an important dimension of Dalit oppression, towards the end of his life his work very much took the form of a liberation theology which sought to utilise and re-interpret Buddhism to explain and point a way out of Dalit suffering (Omvedt, 2001). He states in a draft essay on 'Buddha and Karl Marx':

“But it cannot be too much emphasised that in producing equality society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no value without fraternity or liberty. It seems that the three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha. Communism can give one but not all.”

(Quoted in Omvedt, 2001, p. 148)

Freedom from the external constraint of economic exploitation was important but something more than just social mobility was required. Dalits had to see into the very

heart of their oppression and understand, and then reject, the value system (Hinduism) that subjugated them. In a speech entitled *What Path to Salvation* delivered to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference 30<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> May in 1936, Ambedkar made the following very powerful remarks which identify the caste-mindset as a form of mental slavery:

*“A person whose mind is not free, though [she] is not in chains, is a slave. One whose mind is not free, though [she] is not in jail, is a prisoner. One whose mind is not free, although [she] is still alive, is dead. Freedom of mind is proof of one’s existence...One who is not a slave of usage, customs, and traditions, or of the teachings, because they are brought down from the ancestors; one whose flame of reason is not extinguished – I call [them] a free person.”*

(Text available online:

[www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt\\_ambedkar\\_salvation.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_salvation.html))

No doubt it was this fundamental belief that led Ambedkar to write tracts such as *Riddles in Hinduism* (published posthumously in 1987) which represents a concerted effort to expose through rational discourse the contradiction and confused thinking that, in his opinion, characterises the Brahmin ideology typified by Manu. The book is written with a view to demonstrating to the ‘common mass of Hindus who need to be awakened’ the ‘quagmire’ which such thinking has led them into and also to:

*“...draw attention of the Hindu masses to the devices of the Brahmins and to make them think for themselves how they have been deceived and misguided by the Brahmins.”*

(1987, p. 5)

‘To make them think for themselves’ – this is profoundly revealing, the implication is that the Hindu masses have been labouring under a false consciousness which prevents them from thinking clearly about the circumstances of their oppression. Emancipation, therefore, requires lifting the veil of this false consciousness, which is done by stimulating critical reflection. Riddle 16 is entitled *The Four Varnas – are the Brahmins sure of their origin?* In it Ambedkar argues that there is no consistency in the Vedic literature concerning the origin of Varna – something which is taken to be a divinely ordained article of faith and ‘the very soul of Hinduism’ (p. 189). Beginning with the Purusa Sukta which is ‘supposed to embody the official doctrine of Varna’ (p. 190) Ambedkar examines in considerable detail a host of other Hindu sources to determine how the doctrine is conceptualised in them. He concludes that the Brahmins do not give a uniform or consistent explanation of the origin of Varna. ‘What a chaos’ he states in the closing section:

“On the issue of who created them, there is no uniformity. The Rig Veda says the four Varnas were created by Prajapati. It does not mention which Prajapati. One would like to know which Prajapati it was who created the four Varnas. For there are so many Prajapatis. But even on the point of creation by Prajapati there is no agreement. One says they were created by Brahman. Another says they were created by Kassya. The third says that they were created by Manu.” (1987, p. 203)

Ambedkar’s technique is to deconstruct and accordingly demystify the notion of Varna by using rationality and logic. If the notion of Varna crumbles under intellectual scrutiny then the hold that it has on the popular imagination is weakened. Freedom requires critical self-reflection because exploitation is linked to the oppressed harbouring a false consciousness that assumes their status is a facet of a

divinely inspired 'natural order'. In Chapter Six I present evidence to suggest that this is a tactic employed by Social Action Movement.

***Dalits are not Hindus:*** Eradicating this false consciousness ineluctably led Ambedkar to the conviction that Dalits should extricate themselves from the Hindu fold. The following remarks made by Ambedkar are indicative of the way that he sought to symbolically represent Hinduism as an unnatural and malignant imposition on the Dalits. Ambedkar's contempt for the Gandhian position which, despite rejecting the practice of Untouchability, could not relinquish the central tenets of Hinduism (see below) is clear:

“To the Untouchables, Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis and Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of Karma and the senseless law of status by birth are to the Untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against the Untouchables. These very instruments which have mutilated, blasted and blighted the life of the Untouchables are to be found intact and untarnished in the bosom of Gandhism” (Quoted in Lynch, 1969, p.133)

What Ambedkar is essentially doing is dichotomising Us (Dalits) from Them (Hindus). The hegemonic ideology and symbol system (Hindu laws, texts, beliefs and practices) are constructed not only as 'other' or not-us but as pernicious and responsible for 'our' (Dalit) degradation and misery. In *Mr Gandhi and The Emancipation of the Untouchables* (1943) Ambedkar calls for a number of measures which exemplify this oppositional logic – it is a logic intended to critique the type of thinking that led Dumont and others to conclude that the Dalits replicated the Hindu value system. As we have seen, Ambedkar called for a separate electorate, he also



wanted to see a radical overhaul of the village system in India with separate settlements for Dalits – not only because under the village system it was easy for Hindus to identify Dalits but also because of the dependency relationship that follows from the feudal ties whereby a landless Dalit is forced to work for the higher castes. The village system locks Dalits and caste Hindus into exploitative patterns of relationship and it is supposed to mirror the divine order – it is this divine order which Ambedkar seeks to break, he comments:

“The Hindus are prone to think that they and the Untouchables are joined together by the will of God as the Bible says the husband is joined to his wife and they will say in the language of the Bible that those whom God is pleased to join let no man put asunder. The Untouchables are determined to repudiate such a view of their relations with the Hindus. They want the link to be broken and a complete divorce from the Hindus effected without delay.”

(1943, p. 15)

Dalit liberation, for Ambedkar, requires self-determination based upon a critical renunciation of false Hindu consciousness and nowhere is this more starkly stated than in his comment made at a Dalit conference in Yeola in 1935:

“I am born a Hindu, I couldn’t help it, but I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu.”

True to his word, on October 14 1956, seven weeks before his death, he conducted a ceremony at Nagpur in which he, and hundreds of thousands of Dalits converted to Buddhism. It was the culmination of a mounting conviction that Buddhism represented the only possible path to Dalit emancipation. Religious conversion represented not merely the adoption of a new symbol system and code of practice – it

meant shifting the cosmological frame of reference. This was the radical shift in consciousness that both the Buddha and Ambedkar were after. For the Buddha suffering is an intrinsic component of life that is governed by self-interested activity (largely because ego-centric desire cannot be satiated). Freedom from suffering requires a renunciation of self interested activity – a shift in our consciousness which entails breaking out of the mental prison that ego constructs. For Ambedkar there was a parallel – under Hinduism the Dalit sense of self was a Hindu one. Liberation, the end of suffering for one designated as ‘Untouchable’, required an analogous decentring of consciousness – a shift away from Hindu-ego to an enlightened and free (self-determined) mode of being. Interpreted in this way one can see the revolutionary potential at the core of Ambedkar’s work *The Buddha and his Dhamma* (1956). It was not only the rationalism that Ambedkar perceived at the heart of Buddhism, nor the equalitarianism that appealed to him. It was the ‘blowing out’<sup>3</sup> of Hindu consciousness and the consequent ‘freedom of thought’ that promised the end of Dalit suffering and was therefore so important. In the *Buddha and His Dhamma* he writes:

“The Buddha was strongly opposed to the first tenet of Brahminism. He repudiated their thesis that the Vedas are infallible and their authority can never be questioned. In his opinion, nothing was infallible and nothing could be final. Everything must be open to re-examination and re-consideration, whenever ground for re-examination and re-consideration arise. [human beings] must know the truth – and real truth. To him freedom of thought was the most essential thing. And he was sure that freedom of thought was the only way to the discovery of truth. Infallibility of the Vedas meant complete denial of freedom of thought. For these reasons this thesis of Brahminic philosophy

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<sup>3</sup> Enlightenment or nirvana is often described as a ‘blowing out’ in Buddhist texts – not the positive attainment of a particular state but extinguishing the egocentricity that perpetuates suffering.

was most obnoxious to him.” (Text available online:

[www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/ambedkar\\_buddha](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/ambedkar_buddha))

It is ‘freedom of thought’ which is so central to the three research themes that I am exploring in this thesis. Requiring rigorous self-reflective inquiry, I believe that ‘freedom of thought’ is the key not only to Dalit emancipation but also Dalit participation in learning (themes which I explore in more detail in the following chapters) and this was certainly a conviction that motivated Ambedkar. Under the auspices of ‘The People’s Education Society’ he started many educational institutes such as the Siddhartha College in Bombay (1946/7) and these opened up new vistas of learning for Dalits. As Rao (1995) argues many of the students educated at these centres became increasingly politically conscious after recognising, and exposing as fraudulent, the discrimination that they were confronted with at every level of society. The militant Dalit Panthers movement that took shape in 1972 and the burgeoning field of Dalit literature that accompanied it grew out of Ambedkar’s conviction that education was the motor force for Dalit liberation (a theme which I explore in more detail in Chapter Seven).

## **The Tamil/Dravidian Dimension**

Although Ambedkar’s influence on Dalit organisations like SAM cannot be overemphasised it is important to recognise that there are additional elements to the SAM ideology which have a distinctively Tamillian and South Indian flavour. Once again there is not the scope in this chapter for a detailed exposition of what came to be known as the Dravidian Movement and I will focus on two important elements that have clearly influenced the SAM agenda. The first is the construction of a South Indian ‘Dravidian’ counter culture that developed in opposition to a perceived North

Indian/Aryan Brahmin hegemony. The term Dravidian essentially refers to a group of languages that can be distinguished from Sanskrit (conjectured to derive from a proto-Dravidian language that would have been spoken by an indigenous population prior to the Aryan invasion). However, as Aloysius (1998) points out ‘Dravidian-ism is a ‘complex of attitudes, ideas, values and aspirations’ that have served as a powerful symbol of anti-Brahminism in South Indian political and cultural movements. In a sense it does not concern us that, as Keay points out, ‘it has yet to be proved that the Harrapans’ [a pre-Vedic civilisation c. 3000 BC] language was some form of Dravidian’ (p. 118) because it is the symbolic relevance of the claim that is most pertinent to our quest to understand an organisation like Social Action Movement. The second important element is the emphasis that was placed on the notions of ‘self-respect’ and ‘rationalism’ by some of the foremost proponents of Dravidian ideology including E.V. Ramasamy (better known as Periyar) and Pandit Iyotha Thass.

### **Towards a Non-Brahmin identity**

As Jacob and Bandhu (2002) point out Tamil Nadu has witnessed a ‘vibrant and sustained anti-Brahmin Dravidian movement’ (p. 35). And whilst a number of different elements (not all of them consisting of lower caste groups) can be said to have played a part, one common and significant theme was a disaffection resulting from the virtual monopoly of Brahmins in the educational and employment opportunities offered by the British. Whilst protests were only sporadic during the nineteenth century and had a fairly narrow social base consisting of the more well-to-do non-Brahmins including industrialists, lawyers and doctors – the anti-Brahminism advocated by these movements had an important role to play in introducing what Radhakrishnan (1996) refers to as ‘...a distinctive communal idiom into South Indian politics and policies on the backward classes.’ (p. 111).

A decisive ideological component of the Dravidian movement was developed by the South Indian Liberal Federation (Justice Party) when in 1917 they released the ‘non-Brahmin manifesto’ which expressed resentment at Aryan/Brahmin hegemony. Indeed in 1956 after the present state of Tamil Nadu came into being as a result of the reorganisation of states on a linguistic basis there were attempts to impose Hindi as the national language. The Dravidian party (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam - DMK) swept to power on the crest of a popular movement in defence of the Tamil language. Jacob and Bandhu note:

“Hindi was identified with North Indian Brahminical domination and the struggle against the imposition of Hindi had Tamil nationalistic overtones.”

(2002, p. 35)

According to the Dravidian movement, then, self determination carried with it a forceful anti-Brahminical message and it is important to reflect on this when exploring the type of influences that have shaped the work of an organisation like Social Action Movement.

A key figure in the Dravidian movement was Periyar. In 1925 he established the Self Respect Movement (SRM) which in 1938 merged with the Justice Party and in 1944 became the first fully Dravidian political party and re-named Dravidar Kazhagam. Essentially Periyar believed that the freedom and equality of hitherto subjugated groups (including Dalits and women) required self-determination driven by political participation and active citizenship. The notion of self-respect was crucial here as Anandhi (1995) points out:

“...Periyar elaborated the concept of *Suyamariyadi* or self-respect. For him, the foremost thing an active political subject required was the realisation of her/his self-respect. Hence, the ideology of SRM was to basically transform the victims of inequality and unfreedom into active subjects, who, through their conscious interventions in history should ensure emancipation/self-respect. Periyar believed that no-one else could speak for and represent the victims of oppression, but themselves.” (p. 22)

Periyar was also imbued with a strong rationalist sense and for him the political agency and emancipation of subordinate groups required the rejection of many of the practices associated with Hinduism. Indeed those practices which devalued and delegitimised groups such as women and Dalits and curtailed the potential for self-determination were denounced as superstition. Such ideological convictions have clearly influenced the work of Social Action Movement who have sought to deconstruct and challenge the Hindu identity in a number of ways including identifying inherent contradictions and superstitions. Furthermore Periyar believed that the non-Brahmin movement did not go far enough in terms of Dalit liberation if it continued to use the language of caste. He linked Dravidianism with anti-Hinduism and this is another factor which is evidenced in the work of SAM. For Periyar the liberation of the Dalits could only occur once Hinduism had been rejected. In 1940 he stated:

“The condition of untouchability of Adi-Dravidas is the worst humiliation for the Dravidas. Hence, the task before the non-Brahmins is to recognise the cultural affinity with the Adi-Dravidas and to form *a united front against Hinduism. By defying the caste identity, they must address themselves as Tamilians*”.

(Quoted in Anand, 2003, p. 24 my italics)

Here Periyar was drawing on the ideas of Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) who Aloysius (1998) describes as the first 'Dravidian ideologue'. 'More than anybody else's' argues Aloysius, Thass':

“Concept of Dravidianism, a result of long years of study and reflection, brought together the major areas of Tamil collective life, their literature, culture, religion and history – into one compressed and integrated thesis. [...] an ideology fashioned for the emancipation of the subalternised communities within culture.” (p. 191)

Thass formulated the basic elements of Dravidianism by developing a distinctively Tamil neo-Buddhist philosophy. He linked the decline of Buddhism in India with the rise of Brahminism and sought to demonstrate through a detailed reading of Tamil sacred and literary texts:

“...how the victory of Brahminism in the sub-continent signified a semiotic conquest' an achieved mastery over language and meaning”

(Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998, p. 96)

This neo-Buddhist re-reading of history and literature has certainly had a significant influence on some of the key decision makers in SAM (as revealed in the extracts from my interview with the Dalit Media Network editor quoted in Chapter Six). By arguing that the *Pariah* (Dalit) caste were descendents of the original Tamils whose religion was Buddhism (and therefore anti-caste conscious), Thass was invoking a bygone 'golden' era, a 'way of life that was far more egalitarian and just than anything to be found in the present day' (Geetha and Rajadurai, p. 108).

As such he subverted the idea that status was ascribed by birth. Purity and merit had nothing to do with caste and only became conceptualised in this way when the Aryan/Brahminical Hindus, who imposed the pernicious doctrine of Varna, enslaved the original Tamils/Dravidians.

## **Hindu Reformism**

In sharp contrast to the rejection of Hinduism and Brahminism espoused by Ambedkar, Periyar and Thass (amongst others) some have sought to make concessions to the Dalits whilst vigorously defending their Hindu credentials.

### ***Sri Aurobindo***

One such Hindu reformer was Sri Aurobindo. Aurobindo (originally published 1916) essentially felt that the Purusa Sukta hymn was poetic symbolism intended to ‘image difficult and hidden truths’ (1999, p. 161). Over time, Aurobindo argues, the deeper truths have been obscured and the caste system has (d)evolved by attending to the letter rather than the spirit of the hymn and linking the four orders with the material, rather than spiritual domain. Aurobindo asserts that to understand Varna one has to reflect on the ontological truth that grounds Vedic philosophy – that ‘[human beings] and the cosmos are both of them symbols and expressions of the same hidden [Divine] reality’ (p. 162):

“From this symbolic attitude came the tendency to make everything in society a sacrament, religious and sacrosanct, but as yet with a large and vigorous freedom in all its forms. [...] Thus we have first the symbolic idea of the four orders, expressing – to employ an abstractly figurative language which the Vedic thinkers would not have used or perhaps understood, but which helps best our modern understanding – the Divine as knowledge in [human beings],



the Divine as power, the Divine as production, enjoyment and mutuality, the divine as service, obedience and work. These divisions answer to four cosmic principles, the Wisdom that conceives the order and principle of things, the Power that sanctions, upholds and enforces it, the Harmony that creates the arrangements of its parts, the Work that carries out what the rest direct.”

(1999, p. 162)

The crucial idea then is that since the governing principle behind everything is the one divine reality then one needs to transcend the ‘separative’ consciousness which obscures our perception of this reality. Aurobindo’s point is that this spiritual ‘truth’ has been lost with the progression of society and the insitutionalisation of caste whereby a social and economic system is constructed on the basis of the four orders. What began as a symbol for the cosmic principle slowly becomes the division of human beings into ideal-typical categories (Brahmin honour resides in being pure and pursuing knowledge, Shudra honour resides in faithful service and obedience). At first, argues Aurobindo, birth was not important and the outward economic and social supports for the fourfold order were of secondary importance to the guiding spiritual principle. However, over time, birth and economic function, religious ritual and family custom became the defining features of Varna and caste became a mere convention:

“In the full economic period of caste the priest and the Pundit masquerade under the name of the Brahmin, the aristocrat and feudal baron under the name of the Kshatriya, the trader and money-getter under the name of the Vaishya, the half fed labourer and economic serf under the name of Shudra.”

(1999, p. 164)

I do not believe that Aurobindo is offering a crude apology for the notion of caste, rather his views represent a deeply held conviction that caste, as it exists today, is a betrayal of the spirit of Varna. He writes:

“...it has become a name, a shell, a sham and must either be dissolved in the crucible of an individualist period of society or else fatally affect with weakness and falsehood the system of life that clings to it. That in visible fact is the last and present state of the caste system in India.” (p. 164)

It is this last point that sustains my belief that one can draw on the epistemological and ontological assumptions of Vedic philosophy to think about Dalit emancipation. Most importantly for the Dalit emancipation movement, it would seem that at least some people who have thought deeply about the Vedic philosophy that lies at the heart of Hinduism, can view the caste system, as it stands today, as a violation of the very spirit of Vedic wisdom.

### ***Gandhi***

Perhaps the most famous Hindu that has ever made concessions to Dalits is the iconic leader of the Indian independence movement M.K. Gandhi. Whilst Gandhi believed that the practice of Untouchability was a sin which blighted Hinduism, like Aurobindo, he refused to admit that the doctrine of Varna was to blame. Again like Aurobindo, he argued that the idea of Varna had become corrupted and originally the four-fold division of society was devoid of distinctions between high and low, pure and impure – each was complementary to the other and necessary for the coherent functioning of the whole body of Hindu society. Gandhi did describe the practice of Untouchability as a ‘gangrenous limb of Hindu society’ but he conceived of its amputation in terms of absorbing the Dalits into the Shudra Varna and demanding that

the upper-castes 'pay the debt they owe to their suppressed brothers and sisters' by purging themselves of this 'black sin'. As Lynch (1969) states 'The well to do upper castes were to be the trustees of the poverty stricken lower castes'. For Gandhi, Dalit plight was a moral and religious issue not a matter for political agitation and it is not difficult to see why this may have struck Ambedkar as not only patronising but detrimental to the cause of Dalit liberation. Gandhi had a vested interest in preventing Dalits from engaging in a critical self-reflection that might cause them to abandon Hinduism because Hindu unity was essential for national emancipation. He therefore placed the onus on Hindus themselves to reform their attitudes to a group of people he labelled Harijans (or Children of God) and often vacillated in his thoughts on intractable issues like inter-dining and inter-marriage.

### ***Bhakti***

Gandhi was indubitably influenced by the Bhakti movement, which 'surfaced in various parts of the sub-continent over several centuries' (Srinivas, 1996) and also represented an attempt to reform Hinduism. The movement drew inspiration from the Bhagavad Gita in its assertion that unfailing devotion (or Bhakti) to God (not an intermediary priesthood or birth into a particular caste) was all that was necessary for the spiritual life. As such it was anti-caste, pro-poor, pro-women and anti-elitist and therefore achieved considerable success amongst the lowest castes. These ideas are epitomised in the mystical works of the 'poet-saint' Kabir (1440-1518) who combined elements of Sufi and Bhakti philosophy at the same time as rejecting the orthodoxy of Vedic and Islamic sacred scripture. Tagore (1915) in *Songs of Kabir* offers this translation:

"It is needless to ask of a saint the caste to which he belongs;

For the priest, the warrior, the tradesman, and all the thirty-six castes, alike are seeking for God.

It is but folly to ask what the caste of a saint may be;

The barber has sought God, the washerwoman, and the carpenter – even

Raidas was a seeker after God.

The Rishi Swapacha was a tanner by caste.

Hindus and Moslems alike have achieved that End, where remains no mark of distinction.”

(p. 46)

### ***Dulling the pain of oppression***

For many Dalit activists the fundamental problem with such ideas are that they obfuscate the pain of Dalit existence and suppress the ‘righteous indignation’ that is necessary to transform Dalit consciousness. Anger is the sentiment that many Dalit intellectuals so forcefully communicate in their writings and anger at the divinely imposed cosmic order is seen as the motor for revolutionary change. Viramma’s son (see above) offers the following comments:

“Who is this miserable God who made us Pariaha? We’re all conceived in the same way! The husband screws the wife and we spend ten months in the womb! So why at birth do they become superior and us inferior? And we should have to accept that and work for a ten-rupee note? Who is this bastard of a God who’s done that? If we ever meet him, we’ll smash his face in! Why did he do that, that bloody God: them rich and us poor.”

(Webster 2002, p. 127)

## *Hindutva*

It is anger such as this that serves as a powerful force for organisations like SAM to tap and can serve as a catalyst for the self-reflective drive inwards aimed at throwing off the shackles of an oppressive consciousness. However, it can also be tapped by the right wing Hindu fundamentalist parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad who often wish to direct resentment away from Brahminical hegemony towards Muslim communities constructed as enemy-other. These virulent strains of nationalism seek to conflate being Indian with being Hindu and they have exerted a powerful influence on Indian politics. When I conducted my fieldwork the BJP were in power nationally and the Hindutva agenda was clearly exerting an influence on the nominally Dravidian parties that grew out of Periyar's self-respect movement and the defence of Tamil culture/identity enshrined in Dravidianism (the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) (see Chapter Six).

Anandhi (1995) argues that the ascendancy of the Hindu right has 'erase[d] and suppress[ed] the multiple identities of various religious and ethnic groups' (p. 1) including the Dalits. Furthermore Gandhi's appropriation of Hindu symbols in the freedom struggle may well have led to a homogenised notion of Hindu identity that fanned the flames of such extremism. Anandhi conducted research in certain slum communities in Madras and investigated the effect of 'communal politics' on Dalit identity. One particularly alarming trend he points to is the increasing levels of support that Dalits are giving to Hindutva parties which he attributes to the search for 'new and broader' identities that transcend caste as an attempt to cope with urban marginalisation and caste-based discrimination. This has led to acts of violence

against Muslims and some Dalits internalising the Hindutva ideology in a bid to ‘subvert their marginality’.

For organisations like Social Action Movement Hindutva is a pernicious ideology that obscures the real cause of Dalit suffering namely caste-consciousness. Neither Gandhi nor the Bhakti movement spoke out strongly enough against the social system which perpetuates Dalit bondage. To do this, argue many Dalit activists, one must be ready to do what Gandhi never could - challenge the very essence of the Hindu mind.

## **The Transformation of Dalit Consciousness and Self-Reflective**

### **Inquiry**

In this chapter I have tried to tell a story about caste consciousness. It is not the only story that can be told but it is one that attempts to draw on a range of sources to make a case for the necessity of critical self-reflection in the struggle for Dalit emancipation. I began with an exploration of the ideological architecture of the caste system and argued that the Purusa Sukta hymn and the Laws of Manu – had a profoundly constraining influence on Dalit consciousness. Both have been used to justify the idea that Dalits are innately inferior and impure human beings. I then looked at some of the ways in which these ideas have contributed to the development of a social structure that legitimises Dalit subjugation and prevents self-determination (the prohibition of Dalit participation in learning being instrumental in this respect). Although there have been changes in this social structure, the practice of Untouchability has been outlawed and Dalits have been encouraged to participate in learning they continue to remain on the margins of society and subject to severe discrimination. If we want to understand why I believe that we need look no further

than the following comment made by Dr Ambedkar in his seminal work *The Annihilation of Caste* (1936):

“The emancipation of the mind and the soul is a necessary preliminary for the political expansion of the people.” (p. 14)

In the following chapters I explore what one organisation has done to bring about this mental liberation.

## **Chapter Six: Social Action Movement and the Transformation of Dalit Consciousness**

In the first half of this chapter I introduce Social Action Movement by giving a brief overview of the structure of the organisation and then considering some of the key elements of what I shall refer to as the SAM philosophy (or *modus operandi*). In the second half of the chapter I build on this understanding to explore research themes one and two by looking at some of the ways in which SAM utilise the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry to facilitate Dalit emancipation.

I divide the second part of this chapter into two main sections to reflect different stages on the transformative journey that is perceived as integral to emancipation. The first part (A) is entitled ‘Them’. It deals with SAM’s attempts to restructure Dalit consciousness through encouraging them to reflect on, and renounce the symbols, values and practices associated with the notion of ‘Untouchability’. The belief system that these markers signify, it is argued, has been foisted on Dalits by what is perceived as a dominant Hindu hegemony and by rejecting them the Dalit affirms his or her liberation from a constraining caste consciousness. In this sense I explore Dalit self-determination in terms of a resistance to ‘Them’ (those who mark a Dalit as ‘untouchable’ and impure).

The second part (B) is entitled ‘Us’. For a Dalit to be truly liberated, argue SAM, a more positive mode of self-awareness is essential. Dalit emancipation requires more than simply rejecting an oppressed consciousness because self-determination has as much to do with what one chooses to embrace, as it has to do with what one self-



consciously denies. The 'Us' then refers to *an affirmative Dalit consciousness* – it is an exploration of some of the ways in which SAM have sought to articulate a Dalit identity that is not constrained or contaminated by the notion of 'Untouchability'.

As I discuss below not everyone connected with SAM is in agreement about the precise parameters of this new Dalit consciousness and this is reflected in wider debates amongst Dalit activists as to what it should look like (is it Christian or Buddhist, Muslim or atheistic? Does it praise similarities or celebrate differences? Are Dalit women doubly excluded in a society that is not only influenced by caste but also patriarchy?). However, perhaps it is important to note at the outset - the very fact that Dalit consciousness is a multiply contested domain bears testimony to the progress that has been made. Under the rubric of the caste system Dalit/Untouchable consciousness is very much orientated to the cosmic inevitability that one is born and one dies Untouchable.

Although I adopt this dichotomy for structuring the chapter I recognise that the picture is much more subtle. For example the critical self-reflection that might lead a Dalit individual or community to reject their inferior status will probably involve a complex admixture of contrasting symbols, language and idioms. A Dalit might convert to an alternative religion or reject religion outright ostensibly turning his or her back on the whole symbolic significance of caste and yet continue to conceptualise notions of purity and impurity using the language and symbols of Hinduism (for example hereditary occupation, temple entry or diet). Furthermore the fact that a Dalit might convert to Christianity or Buddhism and continue to suffer discrimination within these communities, precisely because they are Dalit converts,

suggests that caste consciousness is not exclusively the preserve of those who practice Hinduism and is diffused more widely through out the Indian sub-continent. It would therefore be a mistake to see the Us-Them dichotomy as anything but a very tentative model for understanding the transformation of Dalit consciousness. Indeed later I shall argue that, whilst rejecting an oppressed consciousness is vital for Dalit emancipation, the more firmly battle lines are drawn and the oppressed-oppressor binary entrenched, the more carefully one has to think about the impact this has on the opportunities for Dalit participation.

## **Part One: Introducing Social Action Movement**

### **Social Justice through Collective Action**

Social Action Movement has its origins in a specific episode of violence visited upon a Dalit community (Village S) from the Kanchipuram district in 1985 for failing to observe the rigid demarcation between the caste Hindu community and the Dalit colony. In that year a group of Dalit youth came to Father M, a Catholic priest from Chennai, seeking his support in response to intimidation from neighbouring caste Hindus. In our first interview Father M recounts the episode:

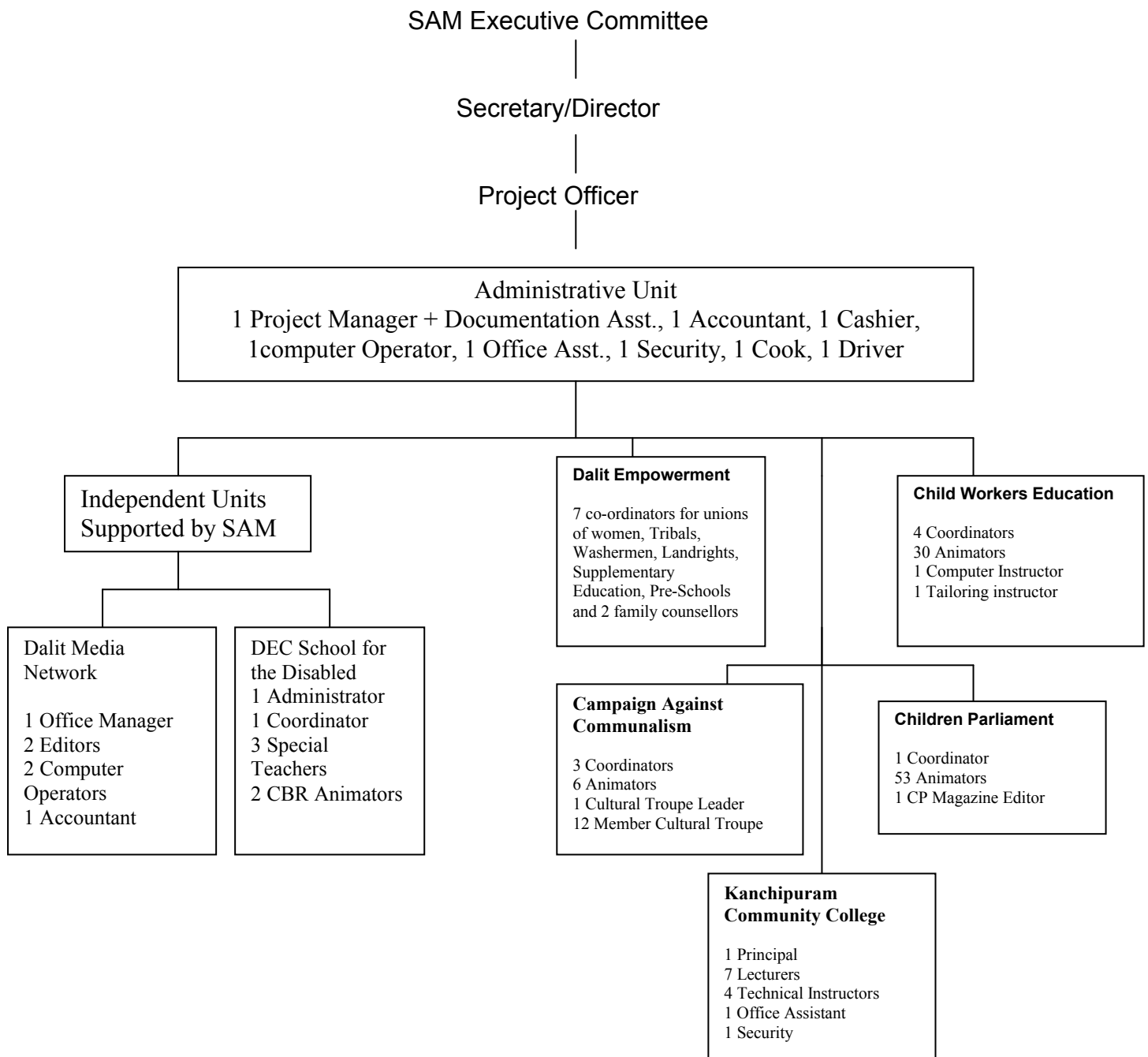
*“ In 1985 there was a huge communal clash between Dalits and the upper castes. [The Dalits] wanted to have a festival, so the usual custom is – they prepare an invitation. This particular invitation was signed by the Dalits; ‘S. village people invite you’. The village people said ‘you are not village people – you must sign your invitation as ‘S. Dalit people’. They said ‘you can have your festival, you can have your invitation but you have to sign it as S. Dalit colony’. [The Dalits] began to say ‘no we are also village people, we are S.*

*village and we are paying our taxes as you do so we have the right to sign as village people'. The [caste Hindus] said 'no way' but the Dalits went ahead with the festival...the electricity was switched off that night. But these people are used to conducting the festival without electricity – with torches and so on. About 2 o'clock in the night the festival was over – everyone went to sleep. At three o'clock the houses were torched. So that was the incident that led to the beginning of SAM. In those days SAM was not really an NGO [Non Governmental Organisation], we said that we will come together, the young people – but as it grew up then it became an NGO."*

(Interview FM20/2/04)

With head offices in M, a small village 65 km south of Chennai, SAM is now a legally registered society with a fifteen member governing body, 30 full-time staff, 110 part time staff and an extensive network of volunteers. From humble origins as an ad hoc collection of disaffected Dalits seeking justice in the face of a specific episode of caste discrimination, SAM has developed into a sizeable NGO advocating Dalit emancipation through structural and ideological transformation. Essentially SAM seeks to mobilize profoundly marginalised sections of society around a set of issues which radically challenge the distribution of societal power and resources. It is the specific methods and philosophies that SAM utilise which will be the focus of this chapter. First, however, I shall provide a brief overview of the organisation.

**Figure One: The Structure of SAM**



## How SAM Works: Structure and Agency

Responsibility for organisational decision-making lies with an executive committee on which Father M, as the director, sits. The committee meets once a month effectively operating in a steering capacity and Father M combines this secular

leadership with his more spiritual duties as a priest at a Catholic church in Chennai. He is very much the organisational figurehead but despite his seniority he works hard to ensure that he is actively engaged in the projects on many levels from decision making, communicating with government and media, to interacting with the beneficiaries on the ground. During a busy evaluation period he still found time to talk to the village children meeting as part of the Children's Parliament asking a number of questions which enabled him to determine the progress that they were making as a result of the project.

Mr S, SAM project officer, is the second most senior member of staff; he has overall responsibility for coordinating the various projects aimed at Dalit emancipation. Each of these projects has one or more co-ordinators responsible for day-to-day decision making and a team of volunteers who work at the chalk face – whether these are the leaders of the unions, set up to empower vulnerable communities, or the facilitators of supplementary education centres and pre-schools (see below). Most of these projects, supported by an administrative team who perform a variety of jobs from clerical assistance to cooking and driving, operate from the head office at M. However Kanchipuram Community College is located in a separate building two minutes walk away and the child-workers education project is located at Kanchipuram town itself – the hub of the region's silk-loom industry which relies heavily on bonded child labour (See Chapter Seven).

Supported by SAM, although managed autonomously, are two independent units. The Dalit Media Network (DMN) based in Chennai not only produces a monthly magazine *Dalit Murasu*, campaign leaflets and posters, but also works to ensure the visibility of Dalit issues in the mainstream media. The other unit is a school for the

disabled which incorporates a day care centre and also community based rehabilitation programmes, training for parents and partnership schemes linking with other organisations.

## **SAM and the Rejection of Hierarchy**

It is worth noting that to see the organisation in terms of a clearly delineated hierarchy with Father M and the executive committee at the top is perhaps to obscure certain crucial elements of the SAM ethos i.e. an antipathy to hierarchy and a firm commitment to Dalit self-determination. Unsurprisingly Father M does not want the executive committee to be seen as an elitist body – the Brahminical element, so to speak, of the organisation. He states:

*“[the executive committee] is not a very powerful body. We are not big people from the city. Most of them are local people...many of them teachers.”*

(Interview FM16/4/04)

Although the committee (like the other members of SAM staff) are themselves Dalits, far more emphasis is placed on the grassroots activists and union leaders – the various men, women and children who are actively engaged in empowering their own communities locally. These, for Father M, are the real driving force behind SAM:

*“...The most important people for us are neither the staff nor the committee but the leaders of the unions... they are the people who take up the work. They are the focal points, they are the people who do things, they are the people facing life... through the union leaders we take the decisions.”*

(Interview FM16/4/04)

These unions are essentially self-help groups set up by SAM to support certain very vulnerable segments of society (Dalit women, Tribal groups (disadvantaged communities designated by the government as Scheduled Tribes) and Washermen (a very low ranking Dalit community)). Father M recounts a specific episode (highlighted by the Tribal Union) that is helpful for understanding the importance attached to the unions and how they operate:

*“...we had one issue of a tribal woman who was working with a rich man in a town near M. She was a domestic worker. One day some jewels went missing from the rich mans house – they were stolen. The blame was put on this lady, she said she didn’t take them but after a few days, she was found murdered in the village, not in the house of the jeweller...she was murdered in the village. When we got the message...the jeweller had given some money to the brother of this lady and they were trying to completely hide the thing. The family of the lady who died, they received the money and they were trying to close the issue – they said it is fine.”*

(Interview FM16/4/04)

This episode provides a graphic illustration of the type of injustice that can occur when human life is so radically devalued on the basis of the position one occupies in the social hierarchy. Fighting such status driven injustice is at the core of all SAM activities. The unions effectively operate as a conduit between the communities and Social Action Movement and in the case of the murdered tribal lady engaged in mediation and advocacy work:

*“But our union in that village – the members of the union they were, very suspicious. Every week they were coming to the house and asking about the jewels and asking whether she was behind it and they knew that is why she has*

*been killed. So even though the family was refusing to cooperate with us, the members of our tribal union in that village, they were adamant and they came to us.”*

*(Ibid.)*

Once Social Action Movement has been alerted to a particular issue then an appropriate course of action is determined which invariably consists of one or more of the following types of activity - campaigning and awareness raising; lobbying local government; mediation and advocacy work with the criminal justice agencies and supporting collective action through the unions. Collective action in the face of injustice is a cornerstone of SAM's strategy for Dalit emancipation and it is SAM's capacity to co-ordinate this which is pivotal. Father M illustrates how this can occur:

*“We said we must facilitate the tribal union and the tribal union decided that we all must come and fight it out and expose [the murder of the Tribal lady]. Since it was a big issue (murder) and the man was a very powerful, very rich man – a jeweller and also a politician, we said all of us are going to get involved – the Women's group, the Washermen's group and other members of the SAM team – all of us, including myself. So all of us went and made a complaint to the local police station. The man was not arrested but was brought for inquiry but nothing came of it. Then we made a petition to the collector [senior figure in district administration] but nothing happened...Then we had a big event – there were about two thousand people gathered. Not just Tribals – other people – all kinds of people gathered. [The jeweller] was arrested but of course nothing came of it. [However] the district office came with about two lakh [200,000] rupees of compensation.”*

*(Ibid.)*



It is crucial to note that although Father M sees the financial compensation as a success, he sees the major victory as not having allowed the death of someone deemed to be inferior by the hegemonic value system to have gone unnoticed. He states:

*“For us it was a success, even though [the rich man] was not put in prison or anything – he was just called for inquiry but the family would not have received this amount of money. But for us most important was not that we got two lakh rupees for the family, more importantly for us was that the death of a tribal woman, who was not a significant woman in that area, the death of that lady would have gone completely unnoticed and we were able to rally so many people together and make an issue of it and then send a message to the authorities and also the rich people in that town that, you know, hereafter you can’t just play with lives even though they are such poor people. There are people, there are organisations who are ready to take up such issues – that kind of signal has gone to the administration.”* (Ibid.)

SAM provides a voice and a mouthpiece for communities that have been prevented from adequate self-determination and self-expression owing to their disadvantaged position in the social hierarchy. So in a significant sense grassroots activism is not only the force that propels SAM it is also an important locus for decision making and agenda setting.

### **The SAM Ethos – Self-Reflection, Self-Determination and Liberation**

In Chapter Five I noted that Ambedkar essentially saw the caste system as a prison – an institution that locked Dalits into servitude at the same time as ostracising them

from mainstream society. This slavery was manifest in a very literal sense in that Dalits were often tied into bonded labour or forced into jobs that caste Hindus deemed unclean and polluting. However, the ‘slavery of the mind’ to which Ambedkar points in his speech entitled *What Path to Salvation* (see page 215) refers to a severely restricted capacity for independent and creative thought owing to an imprisoning ideological framework. Mental slavery is connected with submission to authority, tradition or custom which can impede both critical self-reflection and self-determination. If being Untouchable is a prison, freedom begins with transforming the acquiescent mindset and this is central to Social Action Movement’s emancipatory projects.

### **‘Conscientizing the Marginalised’**

In my first interview with Father M he uses the word ‘conscientizing’ when talking about the media work done by SAM to raise Dalit awareness of oppression:

*“We also have a publications division in the city. We print two monthly magazines – one is for the Dalits – just conscientizing Dalits – which we have been doing for the last seven years.”* (Interview FM20/2/04)

The notion of ‘conscientizing’ has almost certainly been adopted from the work of Paulo Freire following its incorporation into liberation theology. Freire uses the word to refer to the process whereby one learns ‘...to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.’ (1996, Translators note p.17). If we examine some of the ways in which SAM attempt to empower disenfranchised communities it becomes apparent that

encouraging Dalit communities to perceive such contradictions is a central plank in the SAM strategy.

Essentially this is the primary meaning of ‘education’ in Ambedkar’s clarion call ‘Educate, Unite and Agitate’. Education is not restricted to schooling or institutional learning although SAM certainly acknowledge formal education to be important. A variety of initiatives have been set up to facilitate Dalit participation in formal learning environments and it is worth noting two of these. The first are pre-schools set up in communities where there is a high risk of drop out from, or non-enrolment in, mainstream education. Children are taught basic literacy and numeracy with a view to helping them cope with the demands of the mainstream school curriculum. Placed at the heart of Dalit communities, these pre-schools not only emphasise the importance of formal learning but also help parents by ensuring that they do not have to take their children out to work with them or leave them with siblings who thereby might be prevented from attending school themselves.

SAM have also set up Kanchipuram Community College (KCC) which provides vocational training and degree programmes to equip Dalits with the capacity to exercise more choice in the labour market. This is essential not only to improve income prospects but also crucially to allow Dalits to break free from traditional caste based occupations. For SAM, one of the most important features of formal education is that it can help to tackle the problem of hereditary occupation by encouraging aspiration beyond caste obligation. KCC is promoted as:

“A college with a difference, relevant to the tough conditions of the rural poor, we thought, would be ideal in meeting the needs of the rural, Dalit and

backward class youth...KCC envisions to build a society of educated, enlightened, empowered personalities; a society with charismatic and committed leaders; a society without inequalities and injustices, where the rights of all are respected by all, where freedom and brotherhood are the valued virtues. Such integrated education, we are sure, will equip the students well for the highly competitive job market and challenging life situations”.

(SAM info 2001/02 p. 6)

As well as more traditional degree programmes (e.g. B.A. English, History, B.Sc. Maths, Bachelor of Commerce etc) there are also a variety of ‘Skill Development Programmes’ on offer. These range from technical skill training for Electricians, Tailors and Dress Makers to communication skill workshops which look at developing abilities in written and spoken English and improving verbal communication in the work place. As part of the ‘Life Skills Programme’ students take courses with titles such as ‘Understanding and strengthening one’s personality’; ‘Understanding one’s body and mind and ridding one of complexes’ and ‘Group dynamics’. There are also courses in ‘Social Education’ which focus on human rights and gender, caste and communal issues.

The various courses and programmes offered by KCC are indicative of the profound importance that SAM attach to an education that is at once liberating and conducive to promoting transformative action. One could call this ‘consciousness raising’ - stimulating critical reflection upon the circumstances of one’s oppression in a way that challenges previously held assumptions and beliefs. Father M explains that this is

precisely the philosophy behind the Children's Parliament, an educational project for Dalit youth which I describe in more detail in the following chapter:

*"Children are very important to us because they are going to be leaders and citizens tomorrow. We want them to grow up with a certain amount of clarity. We would like to first of all make them the kind of people who grow up in a thinking atmosphere. Not accepting anything that is imposed on them – that is one thing."*

*(Interview FM7/3/04)*

Not accepting anything that is imposed on the basis of caste obligation is the first step in inculcating this critical consciousness. Through the Children's Parliament young Dalits are encouraged to think about some of the life challenges that they face, consider the role that caste might play, and discuss practical solutions and possibilities for collective action. As Father M explains, it is crucially important that the children are able to generate their own insights by participating in discussion and 'doing':

*"We don't want that kind of thinking to come about just by our talking or just by our giving suggestions to them. We want them to learn by doing. That is why we have the Children's Parliament – they come, they play, they discuss. Just now we are in the initial stages so we are giving them all these small issues like what affects them in the school and that kind of thing but slowly we will go into bigger political issues – issues of corruption, issues where they can even challenge the leaders and also talk to them at the ideological level – about religion and all these kind of things."*

*(Ibid)*

As Father M points out, inculcating a critical consciousness *'is a process – they are learning to think and if we can make them think we will have a different kind of*

*people...leaders*”. Here Father M is recognising the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry and in the second part of this chapter I will take a closer look at some of the specific methods that are employed by SAM to stimulate this process. Before I do so it is necessary to identify another important strand in the SAM *modus operandi* – the action that is motivated by a liberated consciousness.

## **Praxis**

Freire, as we have seen in Chapter Three, labels the process whereby the oppressed group act on the basis of their newly emerging consciousness to transform the oppressive reality *Praxis*. For SAM, as for Freire and other Liberation Theologians, this action-orientated dimension is every bit as vital as the reflection. It is in this sense also that we must understand the second and third components of Ambedkar’s rallying cry (unite and agitate).

The unionisation of vulnerable communities that I refer to above is a good illustration of collective action inspired by a newly emergent consciousness of injustice and oppression. For SAM, the basic premise of unionisation is:

“...that collective actions are the best democratic means to achieve basic amenities, just wages, security at work, land rights, gender justice, clean environment and all other human rights.”

(SAM info 2002/03, p. 39)

It is important to recognise that, in common with Freirean thinking, for SAM there is no clear line that separates reflection from action. Praxis can be seen as an ongoing process – reflection leads to action which then informs further reflection which in turn

stimulates new action. One can see the process as a virtuous circle that aims to break the vicious cycle of oppressive modes of caste based thinking and practice.

### ***Recognising rights and exposing irrationality***

Through the unions marginalised communities learn to act on the basis of human rights – they learn to speak a new language and a powerful discourse for challenging the hegemonic value system. The caste hierarchy effectively structures the Dalit social universe using a different schema (relating to duty and obligation) and the notion that a Dalit has rights that are common to all humans is alien to caste discourse. Guided by a determination to rupture traditional modes of thinking, SAM have developed training programmes to increase Dalit understanding of what these rights are. Such strategies manifest the rationalist spirit imbuing the work of key Dalit activists like Ambedkar and Periyar (see Chapter Five).

In 2002 the Women's Union ran a development programme entitled 'Strengthening people in their rights' and included a course looking at the links between tradition, custom and oppression. Aiming to reveal certain customary practices as superstitious health workers were brought into villages to talk to women about a variety of issues including the legitimacy of linking menstruation with purity and pollution taboos.

SAM info 2002/03 states:

“When they began to expose each practice related to women as unscientific and mere superstition, many women for the first time began to understand themselves and how the male dominated society has cunningly enslaved them because of their natural bodily changes.”

(p. 41)

### ***Encouraging self-reliance***

Another good example of encouraging Dalits to think and act in a way that is not conditioned by caste obligation is the emphasis that SAM places on financial independence and self-reliance in employment. Given traditional notions of hereditary occupation and the restriction of Dalit labour to menial jobs through either feudal obligation or pollution taboos this is a vital aspect of liberating action. For example the unionisation of the Dalit washer community (traditionally beholden to the higher castes and obliged to wash their clothes in exchange for food and other subsistence needs) meant that they were able to find alternative employment:

“After unionisation, more than 75% of washermen in Kanchi district have given up washing of villagers’ dirty linen and have taken up other works.

Thanks to the union, many today are using trolleys as mobile ironing carts or as mobile vegetable and fruit shops.” (SAM info 2001/02, p. 14)

For SAM self-determination is not simply about exercising more choice in the labour market. It is also about taking control of the money that new employment opportunities bring. SAM have set up initiatives such as the People’s Bank to encourage saving and financial responsibility. Mr G (the Child Workers Education Project Co-ordinator) had been involved in implementing the People’s Bank; he explained the rationale behind it:

*“When [Dalits and other marginalised communities] have their own bank they can command their money and money is power. They have money in their hand so they can plan so many things for their development.”*

(Interview MG27/2/04)



### ***Promoting democratic participation***

Even though Dalits have a democratic right to participate in government, discrimination is widely reported. SAM have documented cases where Dalit representatives have been threatened and murdered for standing in local elections (Untouchable Country, 2001). Attempting to ensure that those who do get elected have the necessary skills and knowledge to participate in an informed way, SAM have organised training programmes for Panchayat (local government) leaders which seek to equip Dalits with an understanding of the rights and responsibilities of their role.

The 2002/03 Annual Report notes:

“Dalit leaders who have been discriminated in the matter of participation in public life and denied access to political power for centuries, need the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively perform their role as elected members of local bodies. Real decentralised governance, grassroots democracy and power to the people can be achieved only when women, Dalits, minorities and other disadvantaged sections who have been elected, participate actively on an informed basis, enforce their rights and are free to perform their duties in an environment of dignity and security”.

(SAM info 2002/03, p. 13)

Encouraging Dalit participation in government can be seen as another example of the SAM modus operandi – to stimulate critical self-reflection in such a way as to liberate an oppressed consciousness and motivate action that challenges oppressive practices. In the next section I take a closer look at some of the ways in which SAM link the

transformation of Dalit consciousness with emancipation, crucially this entails a rejection of the hegemonic value system – Hinduism.

## **Part Two: From Them to Us**

### **Them: Transforming Dalit Consciousness, Liberation from Hinduism**

*“They (Dalits) are a part, apart from Hindus”*

- B. R. Ambedkar at the Round Table Conference, 1931-32 (Quoted in Outlook Magazine, Vol XLII, No 45, 2002, p. 50)

Taking their cue from the sentiment expressed in Ambedkar’s assertion, Social Action Movement perceive Hinduism to be an ideology (not a religion) that is to be rejected if Dalits are to hope for social justice, greater equity, liberty and the recovery of a humanity which has been denied them under a de-humanising social order. All of my key informants explicitly state that Dalits should extricate themselves from the Hindu fold. Mr P Chief Editor of the Dalit Media Network states:

*“Dalits are not Hindus...they are not Hindus. Dalits were not born Hindus. We were the indigenous people of this land. We did not have any religion, we did not have any god, we did not have any of this devil caste system. It was imposed on us. To make me...to exploit me...some people imposed on me you are a Hindu. You are black. Because I am indigenous, you are black in colour*

*and you are a Chandala or you are an Untouchable. So Dalits did not say that we are Hindus...society has told us.”* (Interview MP25/2/04)

The anger and resentment are clear and a number of very important issues can be extrapolated from this one quote. Firstly Mr P is making a point frequently articulated by Dalit activists – that Dalits have been rendered inferior and impure by an ideology that has been forcibly imposed upon them. The fact that he uses the word ‘exploit’ to describe caste relations, his reference to ‘this devil caste system’ and suggestion that it is ‘society’ that has imposed Hinduism on the Dalits all intimate that he categorically refutes the idea that caste is divinely sanctioned. This is pivotal in undermining a legitimising tenet of caste – that it is an integral feature of the cosmic order.

## **Dalit Roots**

Mr P also alludes to another argument cited by Dalit activists – that Dalits were the indigenous inhabitants of the land. In Chapter Five I touched upon this point. To simplify the argument considerably, it is contended by some proponents of Dalit emancipation that Dalits were the original, darker-skinned population of the geographical region that has become known as India. The lighter-skinned Aryans from the steppes of central Asia invaded and suppressed an indigenous pre-Aryan civilisation (referred to as Dasa/Dasyu in the Vedic literature meaning dark and identified as racially distinct). The Aryans, having conquered and enslaved the Dasyu, imposed the caste system as a way of maintaining their supremacy and categorised the Dasyu as the lowest castes.

Historically the argument is open to interpretation but it is certainly a very potent symbolic statement. By suggesting that a horde of alien marauders imposed certain religious beliefs and gods on an indigenous population who, by implication, either had no gods or different gods – the idea of an alternative social order not based on caste inequality is not only possible it is confirmed as historical fact. Furthermore by claiming to be the original inhabitants of the land – certain basic and inviolable rights about sovereignty are being invoked - rights that, as we shall see below, are very similar to those invoked by Hindu fundamentalists. The important point here is to recognise that, for SAM, the transformation of Dalit consciousness requires the delegitimisation of caste. Dalits must not only call into question the divine origination of the caste system but also lay claim to an antecedent identity.

## **Caste and Racism**

Mr P's use of the word 'black' twice is not coincidental. Firstly, discrimination on the basis of skin colour is prevalent in India. The paler skinned one is, the purer one is deemed to be, and this is reflected in many advertisements for arranged marriages which request pale brides. It is reflected in the commercials for skin bleaching products and underscored in the comment made to me by a woman in Mumbai about the 'horrible' tan that I had built up after a couple of days on the beach in Goa. Dalit activists connect this form of prejudice with the idea that they are the original dark-skinned inhabitants of the land but also draw parallels between caste oppression and racial discrimination.

By linking Dalit oppression to a broader race equality agenda there is enormous potential to elicit global sympathy and this was exactly the rationale behind insisting

that caste inequality is identified as a form of racial discrimination at the Durban conference on racism (2000). In the 1970s a group of militant Dalits from the Bombay slums adopted the name The Dalit Panthers after the American civil rights activists The Black Panthers. The Dalit Panthers frequently utilised violence and revolutionary rhetoric to communicate their anti-caste message and Mr P, by using the term 'black' is adhering to a common strategy for transforming Dalit consciousness. Connecting the Dalit struggle with the struggle of other oppressed groups SAM are employing a very effective tool for engendering solidarity and rebuffing claims that caste discrimination is an exclusively Indian problem.

## **Challenging Fundamentalism**

In stark contrast to Dalit claims about belonging and ethnic origin, Hindu fundamentalism (Hindutva) seeks to construct an Indian history that is quintessentially Hindu. Ignoring the rich cultural heritage of the Indian sub-continent (including Pakistan) religious, linguistic and ethnic differences are obfuscated in an attempt to portray an India that always has been, and can only ever be, Hindu.

Based upon a belief in a common/dominant nation (India), race (Aryan), civilisation and language (Sanskrit), Hindutva identifies all non-Hindus as inferior and this has had a profoundly fragmentary impact upon communal relations in India. Whilst I was conducting my fieldwork the BJP party, heavily influenced by the Hindutva agenda, were in power. The fierce nationalism and militant Hinduism that they espoused (frequently expressed in terms of anti-Muslim or anti-Pakistani sentiment) was a strong countervailing pressure on the SAM message that 'Dalits are not Hindus'. The appropriation of Hindu symbols may have been a strong symbolic force in anti-

colonial struggles if it facilitated political mobilisation and it has been suggested that it was certainly a tactic used by Gandhi to good effect in the battle for Indian independence (Anandhi, 1995). However it could not but silence other marginalised voices, voices which had their own nuanced stories of oppression to tell. Furthermore, the fact that Gandhi was shot by a Hindu fundamentalist angered at his concessions to the Muslims suggests that this I-It (Us-Them) mode of thinking, once unleashed is difficult to contain.

The SAM agenda is vehemently anti-Hindutva and, for them, this is a central component in the transformation of Dalit consciousness. Hindutva weakens the Dalit emancipation by conflating a narrow idea of India with a narrow idea of Hinduism and attempting to blur caste boundaries where politically expedient. Father M writes in the 2002/03 Annual Report:

“By far the biggest and boldest event was our two week–long State-wide campaign against Hindu fundamentalism under the banner – ‘Dalits are Not Hindus’. In a totally Hindutva ambience throughout the country, it was the toughest thing for any movement to venture into and much less for a small NGO like SAM. *Though it is an undeniable fact that Dalits are not Hindus, in a peculiar situation where the Dalits have been made to believe they are Hindus, no one would dare to say the truth aloud for fear of facing the wrath of the Hindus and non-Hindus, Dalits and non-Dalits, rulers and politicians of all shades.*”

(SAM info 2002/03, p. 4, my italics)

The point made by Father M is that the aggressive Hinduism exemplified in the politics of Hindutva has had a powerful and constraining influence on Dalit

consciousness. This is confirmed in a study that he gave me exploring Dalit identities in the slums of nearby Chennai. Anandhi (1995) notes that the failure of 'Dravidian' politics to provide a 'positive identity' for the Dalits has led some to identify with 'a certain Hinduness as a way of subverting their marginality' (p. 58). The vehement anti-Muslim message and the construction of a Hindu-Self in opposition to a Muslim-Other is one such way in which Dalits are co-opted and prevented from seeing clearly into the circumstances of their oppression. Such sectarian divisions are popularly referred to as 'communalism' in India and it is this communalism that is regarded as so damaging to the cause of Dalit liberation precisely because it engenders a false consciousness, serving as an opiate to dull the pain of caste oppression. A Jungian psychoanalyst might posit that Hindutva represses into the Dalit unconscious the painful experience of caste inferiority – bitterness and hatred are transferred/projected onto the Muslim-Other thereby perpetuating Dalit suffering by failing to address the root cause of that suffering.

### **Challenging Internalised Hindu Values**

In the comments made by the director of Social Action Movement and the editor of the Dalit Media Network we see a categorical denial that a Dalit consciousness is compatible or consonant with a Hindu consciousness. For Father M it is an 'undeniable fact', Mr P repeats it to add emphasis and argues that it is something that has been artificially imposed. Both statements assert a Dalit identity that lies outside Hinduism and yet both acknowledge that the socio-cultural milieu is such that Dalits are not only seen by others, but also frequently seen by themselves, as Hindus.

It is not just Hindutva that contributes to this false consciousness. In our final interview Father M draws attention to the fact that many Dalits uncritically appropriate the beliefs and values of Hinduism. He talks about an initial ‘lack of clarity’ that he encounters when communicating the ‘Dalits are not Hindus’ campaign message:

*“I start by asking people ‘do you think that you are Hindus or you are not Hindus’. Because of a lack of clarity, they say ‘yes, we are Hindus, we worship the same’. But then I tell them ‘there are Hindu temples that you are not allowed to enter’. Then they hesitate. I tell them that ‘this means that there is a difference between some of the Hindus and the Hindus that you are’. I tell them, ‘those who don’t allow you into the temples they don’t allow you to do so many other things’. It is a flaw. It starts there with religion. ‘They won’t allow you to build your houses in where the caste people are living, they won’t allow you to own fields, they won’t allow you to have decision making powers in the villages’. The kind of practice that starts with religion is carried on to other fields, soon we realise that we are different from them...”*

(Interview FM16/4/04)

The closing distinction between the ‘we’ that is different to ‘them’ is illuminating and an issue that I return to below. My point here is that the transformation of Dalit thinking, for Father M, requires SAM to make it clear that caste-consciousness is the root cause of this ‘lack of clarity’. Village to village Dalits are encouraged to engage in critical self-reflection to scrutinise lives and livelihoods that have been dominated by caste beliefs.



SAM do not attempt to facilitate the type of social mobility that relies on the lower castes adopting the customs, rites and beliefs of the higher castes, famously referred to as Sanskritisation by Srinivas (1952). It is rather a call for the wholesale renunciation of caste-based thinking. What is required is a remoulding of consciousness and a refutation of *Dharma* (see Chapter Five) which, although having a variety of meanings, has been used to stipulate that reward and punishment (in this life and the life hereafter) depend upon not transgressing the moral order as defined by caste duty. It is *Dharma* in conjunction with a belief in re-incarnation that induces the fatalism that Father M identifies as so constraining for Dalit consciousness:

*“The caste system has religious sanction in India. Hinduism says we are born this way. [Ambedkar] says this cannot be broken so easily. My religion, my God is saying that I belong to this religion. This has spawned a fatalism amongst the Dalits. He says ‘God has made me this way, next birth he is going to make me a Brahmin so let me be a good Dalit. So this kind of fatalism is part of the religion.’”*

(Interview FM20/2/04)

## **Challenging Hindu/Brahmin Hegemony**

Mr P, a Dalit convert to Buddhism, at times talks about false Dalit consciousness, using language that might incline a Marxist to invoke concepts like ‘alienation’ and notions such as ‘inequitable relations of production’:

*“[Dalits] are just like machines you know. They eat, they go to work – all manual labourers – the most degrading work is the scavenging work. They get some small amount of money. Then they come back. They eat, they drink, they sleep. They do not understand that we are in a position like this – we have to*

*come up in life. Who will tell them? Nobody is there to tell them.”*

(Interview MP25/2/04)

There are many factors, argues Mr P, that serve to establish and maintain an oppressed Dalit consciousness. As someone whose job it is to ensure the positive representation of Dalits in the media he is concerned about the Brahmin monopoly of power:

*“ I realised ten years back that the media in India is caste conscious. It is run by the upper caste people, exclusively by the Brahmins - they manipulate a lot of things and they do not show the real picture of India. A foreigner doesn't know what the real problem in India is. The real problem in India is caste. But the Indian press doesn't reveal this, they hide this. It is a hypocritical society. They are all caste conscious, it is the Brahmins who monopolise the media but they say that we have to work for national integration we should come beyond caste lines, they say. Not only in media all the major things – industry or politics, or economics – everything is under their monopoly”*

(Interview MP25/2/04)

For a Marxist, class-inequality would be seen as the main arena for social conflict. Mr P, however, identifies the real problem of India as caste and a vigorous anti-Brahminism (analogous to the anti-bourgeoisie sentiment of Marxism) is, at times, an important aspect of the struggle to transform Dalit consciousness. Here we perhaps see a legacy of the anti-Brahminism that was historically central to the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. There is a tendency to dichotomise caste-conflict using a simplistic Brahmin versus non-Brahmin binary thereby eliding the warrior, artisan

and servant castes and obfuscating the numerous inter and intra caste conflicts that cut across this binary.

The language of ‘us and them’ is used to reject one mode of consciousness (Untouchability under Hinduism) and embrace another (Anti-Brahmin/Hindu Dalithood). Mr P certainly makes this sort of distinction when he offers me the following autobiographical insight:

*“I was brought up in a slum. I did not even have a tube light, I did not have a current in my home – there was no light. But if you visit a Brahmins house, however poor they are they will have electricity, they will have books, his parents will be educated. In my family only my father is educated, his grandfather is not educated. But if you take a Brahmin family nobody will be illiterate, though they may be very poor financially...generation to generation they have education. But rich Dalits or the non-Brahmins, though they may be rich financially, they did not have education. So this is the pity in India.”*

(Interview FM25/2/04)

Distinguishing between an Oppressed-Dalit-Us and an Oppressor-Brahmin-Them is only one of the ways in which SAM use language to shape the way that Dalits reflect and act and this is a subject that is worth exploring a little deeper.

## **Language, Symbolism and the Transformation of Dalit**

### **Consciousness**

Transforming power relationships and challenging the Brahmin hegemony are, for SAM, central to Dalit emancipation and the emergence of a more robust Dalit

consciousness. However it is important to recognise that relations of power and domination operate on the symbolic, as well as on the socio-economic, level.

### ***Language, social space and the battle for the Dalit Psyche***

Language plays a fundamental role in the meanings that are attached to the notion of Dalitness and the rejection of Hinduism. The word ‘Untouchable’ is an integral aspect of the Hindu idiom – it is intimately related to the discursive practices of Hinduism in that it marks a section of Indian society as impure and polluting by virtue of the fact that they are deemed to fall outside the caste system. To be ‘Untouchable’ is to be delegitimised by the prevailing norms of the Hindu belief system, subject to stringent curtailments on life and liberty (on the clothes one wears, the environments one moves in, and the relationships that are formed). ‘Untouchability’ therefore connotes an identity marked by exclusion and prohibition. Like other Dalit activists, SAM refuse to be drawn into discursive practices that mark Dalit identity in terms of the excluded, impure and untouchable ‘Other’. Jalki in an article in the Dalit (the now-defunct English language magazine produced by the Dalit Media Network) notes:

“A Dalit is included in Hindu society only as an outcaste (excluded/the Other). That is s/he is included only to be excluded and thereby set the norms for caste Hindus – someone is a (relatively) ‘high’-caste person because s/he is *not* an outcaste.”

(*The Dalit*, March-April 2003, p. 25)

If the Hindu idiom marks the Dalit-untouchable as excluded other so too do the physical restrictions placed on the socio-geographical spaces that a Dalit is permitted to occupy. These restrictions, as we have seen, not only govern temple entry but also

fragment villages along caste lines. Mr P compares the separation of Indian villages in this way to racial ghettoisation:

*“Every village in India is divided in two – the village and the slum. It is society which has pushed the Dalits into the slum. Wherever you go to a village there will be a slum separate like the ghettos, like the black people who live in colonies. Like that [Dalits] are being separated. This is, to put it in black and white, genocide. “You are not a human-being – you should be away from the village.”*

(Interview MP20/2/04)

Mr P once again invites comparison with the struggle for racial equality but this time he widens the debate by connecting Dalit segregation with being treated as sub-human. Humanising Dalit lives is an important part of the SAM strategy, as Father M communicates in his introduction to the 2001/02 Annual Report:

*“Tuesday, 21 May 2002 must have been yet another usual day for most people. But it was not so for the Dalits of a tiny hamlet called Thinniyam in central Tamil Nadu. For them it was a terribly unfortunate day, as two of them were subjected to the worst type of inhuman treatment, tortured with red-hot iron rods and forced to consume human excreta by the caste panchayat [local government body] president of the village. And this barbaric treatment was for demanding to return their money, which the Dalits had paid him to get government-subsidised low-cost houses which did not materialise.”*

(SAM info 2001/02, p. 4, my italics)

The message is clear caste dehumanises and therefore rejecting Hindu/caste consciousness means nothing less than the restoration of Dalit humanity. In an

important sense SAM polarise and crystallise the debate. Battle lines are drawn up and the rhetoric of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ is used to great tactical effect by SAM. The following is a report on an incident that occurred in 2001. Caste Hindu violence as a mechanism for social control is contrasted with Dalit attempts to express their voice through legitimate political channels:

“On 15 November 2001, a contingent of 150 police personnel descended on the Dalit colony of Sankaralingapuram, Tuticorin district, Tamil Nadu, and unleashed terror. Egged by caste Hindu naikers [look up], not only did the police attack all the Dalits – men and women, old and young – but they ensured that the Dalits of Sankaralingapuram did not have a home to come back to.

Armed with axes and crowbars, they destroyed everything in sight. Houses, and whatever the houses contained – TV sets, bureaus, cots, fans, cycles, transistors – were broken to pieces. Jewels were stolen, cash was looted. Perhaps they thought, the broken people – the Dalits – should only lead broken lives. Water vessels and kitchen utensils with large holes bear testimony to the fury of police and caste-Hindu hatred.

The police first ensured that the Dalits fled the place and then brought the entire colony down. To add insult to injury, many Dalits, especially students, were jailed. The aggressors are scot-free.

What did the Dalits of Sankaralingapuram do to deserve such treatment?

During the recent local-body elections – where several Dalit candidates were not allowed to contest and panchayats were even auctioned – a Dalit, Vijayan,

contested from the non-reserved Sankalingapuram. His nomination led to several attacks on the Dalit community. Many Dalits were not allowed to vote and Vijayan was defeated. Worse, police detained four Dalits on false charges. When the Dalits staged a road block, police lathicharged them. A lathi [baton] wielding head constable was killed in the clash. Violence followed. And these pictures speak for themselves. The mainstream media did not report the issue. This was not New York's World Trade Centre.”

(SAM info 2001/02, p. 32)

In this extract we see the humanity of the Dalit community that is attacked. Sympathy and empathy are elicited when we read of the violence visited upon the villagers and picture the broken TV sets and debris-strewn scene. The police and caste Hindus, by contrast, are demonised as ‘Other’-‘Them’ they are de-humanised so that we can feel no sympathy for the lathi wielding (ergo brutal) policeman that is killed in the clashes. The Dalit Media Network president argues for the necessity of a distinctively Dalit media that provides reporting such as this:

“Whereas when Dalits are forced to carry and eat excreta, and are subjected to indescribable forms of cruelties....even progressive publications like *Frontline* prefer to give prominence to dog-shows. Their property is destroyed; their huts are burnt down; Dalit women are routinely subjected to sexual violence; Dalit lives are plucked like flowers...but mainstream media habitually treats such news as space-fillers; giving them the same importance as accident news or crime beat. For them, we are, after all, lesser humans. The Dalits needed their rightful space in the media. *The DALIT* will provide this. Not just to record atrocities, but to record the undocumented Dalit heritage, to bring to national

light grassroots movements and leaders; to record Dalit triumphs and tribulations. *The DALIT* will provide the Dalits a platform for their dreams and desires; their laughter and sadness; their love and also their pent up anger.”

(SAM info 2001/02, p. 31/32)

The media is seen as a potent weapon in this battle for control of the Dalit psyche – what it means to be a Dalit. Father M observes:

*“It is a hard struggle, you know this caste mind it is an issue of the psyche, the Indian psyche. We all have to forget these things...it is a very difficult thing...it is a matter of the Indian psyche”*

*(Interview FM20/2/04)*

When I ask Mr P about what he feels to be the biggest barriers facing Dalit children in participating in learning he comments:

*“ ‘Dalits have a wounded psyche’. Right from their birth they are being abused. Their families are being tortured, their girls are being raped. So psychologically they are wounded.”*

*(Interview MP25/2/04)*

The following extract from my research journal reveals that Mr S, SAM project officer also thinks along similar lines:

*S tells me something that made him sad recently was that he had put on a special coaching day for Std 12 Dalit children and out of 75 children that were invited only 5 turned up. He attributed this to the years of oppression and ‘something in the dalit psychology’ that prevents them from taking advantage of such opportunities.*

*(Research Journal 20/2/04)*



Of course there may have been many other reasons why the children did not turn up (some of which I explore in the next chapter) but according to SAM the first step is treating the wounded Dalit psyche. First Dalits must recognise the inherent contradictions in the dominant Hindu discourse. Once they hold that Hinduism has on Dalit consciousness has been broken, what remains is, for many, a more open project. Father M observes:

*“Our first slogan at the historical juncture that we are at now we say “We are not Hindus”. That is the first thing that we need to accept. And then who we are comes next. And in the process we will all become clear because now, amongst the Dalit intellectuals, there is a lot of confusion about the construction of a positive identity. Some people like me would like to create our own identity with our forefathers...there are some people who are trying to pull them into Christianity, there are some people who are trying to pull them into Buddhism.”*

(Interview FM20/2/04)

Father M alludes to a number of possible frameworks for remoulding Dalit consciousness – either religious (Christianity or Buddhism) or atavistic (the return to an ‘indigenous identity’). Although SAM is very clear that Hinduism has to be rejected for Dalits to be adequately self-determined – they are less clear about the contours of this liberated consciousness. In the following section I explore this issue.

## **US: Transforming Dalit Consciousness and the Search for a Positive Identity**

### **Engendering Dalit Unity/Restoring Dalit Humanity**

Dalit unity is instrumental to challenging the fragmentary logic of the caste system and the key strategy here has been to coin a collective descriptor that has not been contaminated with the notion of impurity - hence 'Dalit' rather than 'Untouchable'. As noted in Chapter One, the word has been appropriated by Dalit activists to symbolise the oppression that they face under Hinduism and re-claim a lost identity. In a sense it is a symbolic marker that represents hope for the recovery of a crushed heritage, a traditional identity that Hinduism stifled. When I ask Mr P what Dalit means he states:

*"Dalit means... some people say that there is a word in Sanskrit which says 'the broken people'. Bishop Azarya [Dalit activist] says that in the Hebrew language, Dalit means 'people who are crushed'. And there is a Marathi word – which says Dalit means 'the roots' which means again the sons of the soil – the root people. So the word is used in three languages."*

(Interview MP25/2/04)

In Chapter Three I pointed to writers who felt that seeing Dalits as 'broken' or 'crushed' by the caste system is a powerful statement. It serves as a useful mechanism for transforming consciousness because the inferiorised Dalit status is not taken to be divine or eternal but artificial and, more importantly, refutable. The word Dalit therefore offers hope because it hints at the possibility of liberation during one's

earthly existence – something which the notion of Dharma (according to some) expressly denies.

Connected with this point is the idea that recovering a lost identity is also important for recovering a submerged humanity. The Editor of the Dalit Media Network states:

*“We tell the people that you are human beings – for the past 2,000 years we have not been recognised as human beings. First we tell them we are all one then we tell them we are the indigenous people – sons of the soil.”*

(Interview MP25/2/04)

There are two issues to extract from this quote. Firstly, what is meant by the statement that ‘we are all one’? The caste system, as we have seen, operates according to the principle of hierarchy and graded purity/impurity. Even within the main caste categories (Brahmin at the top, Shudra at the bottom and excluded Dalit) there exist sub-castes that are also ranked in order of purity. Inequality characterises intra-, as well as inter-caste relations and therefore certain Dalit sub-castes are ‘the most untouchable of the Untouchables’ as Thekachara puts it in her book *Endless Filth* (1999, p.3).

Enabling Dalits to see past these sub-caste distinctions and helping them to recognise their common oppression under the caste system is, for SAM, essential because intra-caste fragmentation is a significant barrier to the transformation of Dalit consciousness, as Mr P points out:

*“We are trying to make Dalits one but there are sub-caste identities and it is a problem. In Tamil Nadu there are 78 sub-castes within the scheduled caste*

*list. The three main ones are Pariah, Pallar and Chakkiliyar these are the major divisions between the Dalit communities. Like caste Hindus they divide and compartmentalise. They don't join together and oppose the Hindus...*

*The Pallas think of themselves as superior to the Pariahs and the Pallars and Pariahs together think they are superior to the Chakkiliyars...they feel that they are the superior race – “They [the Chakkiliyars] are scavenging – we [higher status Dalits] are not doing that” so they think “we are superior”. Yet Hindu society sees, not only these three, but all of the seventy-eight sub-castes – as untouchables. That, these people don't understand...”*

(Interview MP25/2/04)

The other important point is the assertion that I have touched upon earlier in the chapter that Dalits can be identified as the ‘original inhabitants’ of the land. In the closing quote of the section above Father M also confesses that he would like to see ‘our own identity with our forefathers’. The original inhabitants of ‘India’ (Dalits), prior to Hinduism, so the argument goes, would have worshiped their own Gods, held animistic beliefs and engaged in ritual homage to their ancestors – something that Father M would like to see recovered as part of the Dalit identity. He urges Dalits to

*“...come out of this thinking and believe you have your own Gods you have your own equality and then from that platform you can fight the caste system.”*

(Interview FM20/2/04)

So an alternative identity, like the identity that is being rejected – is to be accompanied by a distinctive idiom as well as a distinctive nomenclature. Again we

must note this 'sons of the soil' idea is potent not for its historical legitimacy but because of its symbolic power to subvert the colonising culture.

## **Religious Conversion**

Some Dalit activists advocate religious conversion as a way of escaping caste oppression. Buddhism is a particularly popular choice amongst Dalits given that Ambedkar embraced it in 1956 shortly before his death. Mr P, himself a Buddhist, immediately says when I ask him what sort of identity he would like to see Dalits adopt:

*“Buddhist. Dr Ambedkar says we are all born Buddhists – it is the land of Buddha – we are the indigenous people – we were practising Buddhism. Now Buddhism is not in its birthplace – in China, Japan, Thailand – in all these countries Buddhism flourishes but in its birthplace there is no Buddhism. Ambedkar has come to the conclusion that we were born Buddhists – it is not even a religion it is a way of life.”*

(Interview MP25/2/04)

Father M himself is less keen to identify any particular religion that Dalits should be encouraged to convert to:

*“We don't promote any other identity because there can be problems. For example I am a Christian and many people ask me 'you are a Christian why don't you tell them to convert to Christianity'. We have a lot of problems with regard to caste in Christianity, there are Dalit Christians and caste Christians so I don't want them to suffer that.”*

(Interview FM20/2/04)

What Father M is alluding to here is the discrimination that some Dalit converts continue to face even after their conversion to another religion. As I suggested above, caste consciousness is not restricted to Hindu communities and certain notions of purity and impurity impinge upon inter and intra community relationships even when caste ostensibly has no part in one's religious convictions. A cover article in the Indian news magazine 'Outlook' (Vol XLII, No. 45) entitled *Choosing their Religion* noted:

"Caste wheedles its way into most religions in India. Categories like Dalit Christians, Reddy Christians, Nadar Christians [both Dalit castes]. Syrian Christians are known to call themselves "originally Brahmin". Moreover, there is discrimination even within the church: in Tamil Nadu's Tiruchirappali and Palayamkotai districts, there are separate pews and burial grounds for Dalit Christians. The nine-judge Supreme Court ruling in the Mandal case in 1993 recognised caste in Christianity. And Islam too has its hierarchies, like the Ashrafi Muslims and the Ajlafi (literally servile) Muslims."

(Wadhwa, S. and Anand, S., 2002, p. 46)

When I ask Mr P how he sees someone like Father M who has embraced Christianity and yet still felt that Dalits should have the freedom to choose their own religion he states:

*"Yes the whole thing is it is up to them to decide. We have every right as Dalits to tell the people to choose any religion but not Hinduism. So Dalits should be willing to choose their own religion – Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism. We tell the people convert yourselves; don't remain a Hindu. Ambedkar's choice was Buddhism, their choice can be anything."*

(Interview MP25/2/04)

By placing the utmost value on a life that is self-determined SAM are attempting to transform Dalit consciousness and encourage Dalits to ‘create’ themselves in line with sentiments and beliefs that they have reason to value not blindly follow caste prescriptions. For SAM, as it was for Periyar, this is crucial for improving self-esteem and self-respect.

***Anti-conversion legislation and prohibiting Dalit self-determination***

As noted the political climate at the time of my fieldwork represented a significant barrier to the transformation of Dalit consciousness. Political parties influenced by Hindutva have a vested interest in keeping Dalits within the Hindu fold and in December 2002 the government of Tamil Nadu passed ‘The Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion’ act which prevented ‘induced’ or ‘forced’ religious conversions. The Hindutva rationale behind such initiatives is that the mass conversions that have occurred periodically (see below) are fraudulent and represent a calculated strategy by Muslims, Christians or Buddhists to wipe out Hinduism from the land of its birth. Of course what induced or forced means is open to interpretation and Dalit activists have argued that it is yet another mechanism for perpetuating caste bondage by making conversion difficult. Valson Thampu writes in an article for the alternative news website *countercurrents*:

*“What politicians like Ms Jayalalithaa [chief minister of Tamil Nadu] do not know is that conversion is the last resort for a human being. We know how upset we feel when even a small habit of ours is disturbed. If so, it is easy to see how difficult it is for a human being to be uprooted from [their] familiar religious terrain and transplanted in a different spiritual soil. Why do people*

*convert in spite of this? The fact of the matter is that the Dalits... of this country are trapped in such unimaginable humiliation and degradation that they are 'forced' to flee from their familiar home in search of freedom and dignity. If 'force' plays a role in conversions, it is mostly force of this kind and it is generated not by those who 'propagate' their faiths, but by the oppressive and inhuman caste system."*

*([www.countercurrents.org/anticonversionordinance.htm](http://www.countercurrents.org/anticonversionordinance.htm))*

SAM recognise the implications that such legislation has for the construction of Dalit identity and Mr P tells me that "we strongly condemn this anti-conversion law" he appeals to the language of international human rights and UN declarations governing religious freedoms, "everyone has the right to propagate their own religion" he says.

SAM's Project Officer, Mr S. is, like Father M, a Christian. He acknowledges that SAM is wary of appearing to have a missionary agenda not least because their international donors (many of whom are faith based organisations such as Dan Church Aid and Icelandic Church Aid) wish to distance themselves from what might appear to be proselytising development work:

*"...[The international donor agencies] could accept that we had to fight against communalism because the communal forces are very strong in India and they can really distort the peace and harmony. Telling [Dalits] that they have to believe in secular values – they are for it. But when we say directly that 'you are not Hindus' they have reservations because they don't want to be branded as agencies that promote religion. So if I am a Christian institute*



*telling a Hindu that you are not a Hindu, it means that I am telling you that you are a Christian”* (Interview MS16/4/04).

Dalits who convert to another religion also lose their entitlement to reservations (welfare measures) and this can be a powerful disincentive to convert. Inevitably this has a detrimental impact upon SAMs attempt to transform Dalit consciousness and can be seen as a mechanism for maintaining Hindu hegemony. Self-determination is difficult when there are powerful economic incentives to maintain a subordinate identity. Nevertheless it is worth noting that in particular cases conversion has brought economic prosperity to some former Dalit communities. In 1981 150 Dalit families in Meenakshipuram, Tamil Nadu converted to Islam. Many of these families have members working in the Gulf and have benefited enormously from the links that they have made to other Muslim countries. One of the Dalit converts from Meenakshipuram commented in the Outlook article cited on page 271:

“Caste Hindus stopped calling us dirty caste names. They had to call me Amir bhai. The wealth too came. I’ve been to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia three times, worked in the harbour there. All Muslims there ate from the same plate. I was no longer untouchable. Had I remained a Pallan (Dalit sub-community), I’d have continued to drink tea from separate glasses kept for untouchables.”

(Wadhwa, S. and Anand, S., 2002, p. 46)

## **Transforming Dalit Consciousness and the Symbolic Domain**

Another important way in which SAM promote a distinctive Dalit identity and one that I touched upon earlier has to do with the symbolic construction and representation of *Dalitness*. SAM recognise Dalits have been excluded from the

‘mainstream’ – they are on the margins (literally and metaphorically) of politics, village life, national life, sport, art, literature, the media, education. In all spheres Dalits, by virtue of their perceived impurity, have been denigrated and represented in negative ways. In literature, it is argued, they are portrayed as pathetic and effete characters unable to take control of their own lives. The two tailors in Rohinton Mistry’s novel *A Fine Balance* (1995) are held up as paradigmatic examples. Having escaped their hereditary occupation (leather workers belonging to the Chamar caste) their lives are blighted by tragedy and misfortune and some Dalit critics suggest that such literary creations do little to inspire a more robust Dalit consciousness. The translator of Valmiki’s autobiography (2003) notes:

“...portrayals of Dalits as mute and pathetic characters, unable to act or speak about their oppression, are characteristic of high caste Indian writers. Dalits in their writings are portrayed as tragic figures and objects of pity, incapable of talking back or feeling enraged. Booker prize winner Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* or Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* are also written in this appropriative voice, a voice that contains, rather than expresses, Dalit experience.” (p. ix)

For SAM it is important to create spaces for a countervailing representation of Dalitness and Dalit literature is instrumental here, defined by Anand (2003), a regular contributor to Dalit Media Network publications as:

“...Literature produced by Dalits in a conscious, defined, modern sense with an awareness of what it is to be Dalit [...] political awareness of the specificity of Dalit experiences.” (p. 1)

It is also crucial to promote Dalit politicians, Dalit journalists and other Dalit icons who champion a more vigorous Dalit identity. Mr P notes:

*“We are Ambedkar’s people. And now Dalit literature has emerged in the last twenty years and there is a strong identity, a Dalit identity. We are Dalits. We say this is Dalit literature as the blacks say this is black literature. This is a Dalit way of life. I am proud because I am a Dalit artist.... After 50 years of independence there was a president who was a Dalit [K.R.Narayanan – the 10<sup>th</sup> president of India from 1997-2002]. So we are bringing this Dalit ideology, this Dalit identity”*

(Interview MP25/2/04)

Whether reporting issues from a Dalit perspective in the media or creating spaces in which Dalits can articulate their thoughts and feelings by reflecting on what it means to be a Dalit – all this has one overriding purpose – to transform the ‘wounded’ Dalit psyche.

## **Conclusion: From Them to Us to We**

In this chapter I have presented a somewhat simplistic ‘Them and Us’ model for the purposes of exploring Social Action Movement’s approach to the transformation of Dalit consciousness. SAM vociferously assert that Dalits should not regard themselves as Hindus. This is the first and most significant step to be taken on the way to liberation and self-respect. The precise nature of the identity to be embraced following emancipation is contested but in a sense this is not so important. What is important for securing liberty and recovering a lost humanity is the extent to which Dalit lives are self-determined.

Self-determination is pivotal to the development of a more robust Dalit consciousness because it serves as a direct challenge to one of the fundamental tenets of the caste system; that one's caste and not one's self, determines life and livelihood. The language and tools that SAM employ are at times revolutionary and there is a tendency to construct the debate in terms of binary opposites (Us; Good, Oppressed, Indigenous Vs. Them; Bad, Oppressor, Alien) thereby polarising and crystallising identities in an excessively simplistic manner. This is not altogether surprising - the emancipation of an oppressed group invariably involves singling out a specific aspect of one's identity or personhood and using it as an explanatory tool for countless injustices at the hands of the oppressor. However, as I have intimated before, extreme caution is necessary when employing such tactics and it is unlikely that the participation of that oppressed group will ever be particularly deep rooted with this kind of fragmentary approach. As David Bohm would argue this segregative logic makes sense only on a very superficial level – it certainly does engender a narrow sense of community cohesion (Us) – a pride in being a Dalit but only by identifying and devaluing an it/other/them. I believe that the more one thinks in these terms the less likely participation becomes.

The transformation of Dalit consciousness requires an awareness of oppression. However when it comes to exploring the ways in which barriers to participation (in learning and wider society) can be reduced, I would argue that it is important to think a bit more deeply about the contours of Dalit consciousness. Intuitively, I believe that it is important to look for alternative ways in which there can be a mutual and simultaneous transformation of consciousness (for both the oppressor and the oppressed). The liberation of Dalits should be seen as part of a wider and deeper

struggle to escape a more restricted mode of human consciousness that is increasingly impoverished the more it identifies an Us which shares nothing with Them. As Freire (1970) notes:

“Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both.” (1996, p. 26)

## **Chapter Seven: Dalit Participation in Learning and the Pursuit of Liberty**

This chapter builds on the argument that I have developed so far by exploring in more detail the critical role that Dalit participation in learning *can* play in transforming Dalit consciousness and stimulating emancipative action. As such I explore research theme three (Dalit participation in learning) by linking it with research themes one (the transformative potential of self-reflective enquiry) and two (self-reflective enquiry and Dalit emancipation). It is important to highlight an obvious caveat at the outset. Not all learning experiences will stimulate the type of critical reflection that Social Action Movement deems pivotal to the transformation of consciousness. Indeed, as I shall illustrate in this chapter, many of the formal learning environments that Dalits are integrated into as a result of current policy discourse (elaborated upon below), perpetuate norms, values and practices that prevent them from clearly seeing into their oppression and therefore acting to transform it.

Although my intention is to provide a more detailed understanding of the distinctive approach to Dalit participation in learning that SAM advocates it is important to state that this chapter does not exclusively focus on the organisation. Not only do I look at the broader Indian education policy context to introduce certain pivotal themes, but I also draw on a variety of encounters in India (in schools and other non-formal learning environments) some of which were unconnected with SAM projects. This approach enriched my understanding of the organisation by connecting it with broader issues and concerns and therefore benefited this empirical component of my thesis.

I structure this chapter in a way that helps me to explore the implications of, what might be viewed as, a fundamental tension between an approach to Dalit education that conceals the root causes of oppression and an approach that attempts to uncover it. In part one I explore certain features of the education policy context which, whilst aiming to facilitate Dalit participation in learning, in-fact fail to sufficiently address the key issue that underpins the educational disadvantage of Dalit children, namely that they are devalued human beings according to the caste system.

In part two I explore the dissonance between policy that seeks Education For All (EFA) and the multiple barriers to participation in learning that Dalits face. I look at some of the pressures that keep Dalit children out of school as well as some of the challenges that they face within certain formal learning environments. I argue that there are tensions between rhetoric and reality, policy and practice that indubitably arise from an unwillingness or inability to critique the value system that perpetuates Dalit marginalisation. Here I consider a ‘rhetoric of poverty’ and a ‘culture of blame’ which prevent education from facilitating the type of critical self-reflection that an organisation like Social Action Movement deems so necessary for Dalit emancipation. Not enough is done to weaken the hold of a world-view that seeks to separate the pure from the impure and this is why I entitle this section ‘Dalit Education and Separation’.

The third part of the chapter looks at some of the educational projects that SAM have developed not only to facilitate Dalit access to schools but also transform the experience and consciousness of oppression in the communities that the organisation seeks to liberate. I begin by reflecting on a particularly pernicious barrier to Dalit

participation in learning – bonded labour. This issue has a profound impact because children as young as six are forced into work (in this instance in the silk looms of Kanchipuram) to pay off debts that have been accrued. An issue that hits Dalit communities particularly hard because of their subservient position in the caste hierarchy, bonded labour is tantamount to slavery and keeps Dalits locked into patterns of dependence on those above them.

This exploration of bonded labour enables one to appreciate why SAM work so vigorously to inculcate in Dalit children the capacity for critical self-reflection with a view to taking transformative action. One initiative in particular is illuminating here; an exercise in participatory democracy for young Dalits called the Children's Parliament. I discuss some of the aims and objectives of this initiative and draw on some observations that I made whilst attending a meeting of the Education Ministers – young Dalits from different villages across the region who were sharing their experiences of barriers to participation in learning and reflecting on what could be done to overcome these.

## **Part One: Education that Obscures the Roots of Oppression**

### **Indian Education Policy**

To understand how education can serve to perpetuate Dalit oppression it is necessary to first look at the policies and commitments that have driven service provision. Given the focus of this chapter, to link Dalit participation in learning with the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry, my primary aim here is to highlight certain



principles that motivate the policy agenda and not exhaustively trawl Indian education policy.

The constitution of India, as we have seen in Chapter Five, enshrines the principles of liberty and equality for all, however it was not until the 83rd constitutional amendment (passed in 2002) that free and compulsory education for children between the ages of six and fourteen was recognised as a fundamental right. As the PROBE report (1999) points out, it is the widespread notion that education is not essential for all citizens that helps to explain why public commitment to universal elementary education has been so ‘half-hearted’ (p. 3). The report also questions the veracity of the notion of ‘free education’ given the high direct and indirect costs of schooling that confront many parents and children (an issue that I return to below).

Nevertheless it would be a mistake to argue that India has only very recently acknowledged the significance of education for all, and it has certainly informed educational policy prior to 2002. Previous constitutional commitments indicate that free and compulsory education for all children until the age of fourteen was regarded as important (Article 45 records that the state shall ‘endeavour to provide’ this within a period of ten years from the commencement of the constitution). Article 46 states that the educational interests of children from the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Tribes should be promoted ‘with special care’ and that they should be ‘protected from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.’

Since these important constitutional objectives a number of government policies and initiatives have all sought to facilitate Dalit participation in learning. In 1986 the

National Policy on Education (NPE) was formulated specifically with the goal of universal elementary education in mind and, in 1992 a revised Programme of Action (POA) outlined strategies and processes to be pursued for achieving this goal. Both the NPE and POA clearly indicate that the enrolment and retention of Dalit children in elementary education is imperative. Targets were set for the universal enrolment of all Dalit children in the 6-11 age group and 75% enrolment in the 11-14 age group as well as the successful completion of primary and middle school stages by 1990.

In 2002, as part of the UNESCO EFA 2000 assessment process, the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration published a profile of Basic Education. Nambissan and Sedwal (2002) examined the situation of Dalit children in India within the Education For All framework. This report points to the main strategies that were devised to facilitate the participation of Dalit children in elementary education through various schemes such as The World Bank sponsored District Primary Education Programme and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All). These initiatives included expanding school infrastructure so that there were more schools available to Dalit children closer to their communities; subsidising the direct costs involved in schooling and providing incentives (free textbooks, uniforms and mid-day meals as well as scholarships). Indian education policy also sought to recruit more teachers from marginalised communities even if this meant, as Nambissan and Sedwal point out, 'relaxing qualifications if necessary'.

### ***Education policy in Tamil Nadu***

Education policy in India is only partly determined by central government and the states have a certain amount of autonomy in implementation. It is therefore worth briefly looking at the policy context in Tamil Nadu. In accordance with the national

framework, the State of Tamil Nadu has adopted a two-pronged strategy within an Education For All agenda. On the one hand there are policies aimed at increasing the 'quantity' aspect of education and schooling; the supply side dimension of educational planning. The 2003/04 Policy Note on Education acknowledges the significance of improving school infrastructure and not only commits to improving basic amenities in schools such as toilets and water facilities but also notes the aim of providing 'schools in all habitations where there are no schools if the minimum population is 300 and there is no school within a radius of 1km.' Other stated objectives include, opening village libraries, enrolling all school age children before 2003, eradicating drop out fully by 2010 and eradicating illiteracy.

On the other hand there is also a commitment to improving the 'quality' of educational services. Policy objectives, amongst others, include 'improving and enriching the syllabus' to ensure minimum levels of learning, recruiting Dalit teachers through reservation policies, refresher teacher training courses and distributing 'quality textbooks at fair prices on time'. There are also many general initiatives aimed at improving the access to, and quality of, educational opportunities that are available to children from impoverished backgrounds. For example the free noon-meal scheme introduced in 1982 would indubitably offer an incentive to poor and undernourished Dalit communities to send their children to school. So too would the special health programme implemented in 1999 that encouraged regular medical examinations of children in schools.

### ***Dalit welfare schools***

It is interesting to note that special schools specifically targeted at Dalit children seem to be an important feature of enhancing the participation in learning of these marginalised communities. In 2003/04 the state of Tamil Nadu had 1018 ‘Adi Dravida Welfare Schools’ catering for Dalit communities of which the vast majority serve the primary level (761) compared to 147 middle schools, 51 high schools and 59 higher secondary schools. The government recognises the importance of schooling within easy access and states:

“Providing educational facilities nearer to the habitations of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is the prime concern of this Government.”

(2003/04, p.1)

With this in mind Tamil Nadu is trying to phase in school upgrade so that more Dalit communities have access to higher-level education. For example it is noted that during the 2003-2004 period the Adi Dravidar Welfare Middle School at Mathanam, Nagapattinam District was upgraded into a High School and 10 Primary Schools were upgraded to Middle Schools.

On the face of it these are laudable commitments, particularly, as Nambissan and Sedwal (2002) point out:

“...schooling within easy access has always been relatively poorer for the more vulnerable groups as compared to the population in general, especially in rural areas...primary schooling (schools/sections) is available within a

significantly smaller number of predominantly Dalit habitations (37.03%) as compared to general rural habitations (49.79%)”

(p. 76 – statistics from the National Council of Educational Research and Training (1992, 1998), fifth and sixth All-India Educational Survey)

However, I question whether a separate school system for Dalit children genuinely enhances their *equitable* participation in learning. One might argue that segregation of this nature is tantamount to state sanctioned enforcement of purity and pollution norms and as such is not about participation in learning on an equal footing with children from other communities.

### ***The marketisation of learning***

Furthermore, the marketisation of education and the proliferation of private schooling in India create a strong pressure to opt out of government schooling if you can afford to. According to the Tamil Nadu School Education Department Policy 2003/04 private institutions play ‘a significant and commendable role in the field of education by establishing and maintaining institutions of a high standard’ (p. 10). However, as the PROBE report (1999) points out private schooling presents ‘both opportunities and dangers’ (p. 102) and one of the most significant dangers is that they can distract attention from the breakdown of government schools which are the only option for some children. Therefore, not only the welfare schools specifically targeting Dalit communities, but also the government schools that are largely composed of those children from low caste backgrounds who cannot afford alternative schooling

(approximately 74% according to Vasavi 2003, p. 76) are at risk of becoming learning ghettos – poorly resourced and delivering sub-standard education to the lowest echelons of society. I think one has to ask to what extent this is caste discrimination by stealth. Ostensibly government policy advocates education for socially excluded and deprived groups, however if the upper echelons of society have access to far superior learning environments then this will do little to transform the mindset that views some human beings as innately inferior to others.

### ***Non-Formal Education***

Another strategy for enhancing the participation of marginalised and excluded groups in learning is the promotion of non-formal education (NFE) schemes. These schemes are intended to reach children who do not have access to full time schooling – either because they work or face strong cultural pressures to discontinue their education prematurely (for example girls who are married at an early age in some parts of India). The Government of India and the Government of Tamil Nadu both actively promote NFE because such schemes are seen to offer a flexible approach to learning that can be more responsive to the needs of the local community than formal schooling. For example children from Dalit communities primarily involved in agricultural work can attend learning centres that open at different times of the year depending on harvesting requirements. Similarly evening tuition centres such as the ones I describe below offer an opportunity for learning outside formal school hours for children who work as bonded labourers in the silk looms of Kanchipuram.

NFE schemes are generally implemented through partnerships between state governments and voluntary agencies and aim to provide a rudimentary education

geared towards achieving basic literacy and numeracy. The recognition that education is not restricted to formal schooling is, as Illich (1971) reminds us, an important one. Not all communities can access the educational opportunities that are available through formal schooling and therefore learning environments have to be responsive to the needs of the local communities that they serve. Problems arise however when NFE programmes simply become mechanisms for delivering inferior quality education to marginalised communities whilst governments do little to improve the quality of formal learning available to those disadvantaged groups. NFE has the potential to become another low-level tier in an already highly stratified education system and can serve to perpetuate many of the problems that damage poorer communities such as very poorly paid child labour or unequal access to quality schooling.

Nevertheless I believe that Non Formal Education does have the potential to play an important role in Dalit emancipation providing that it is firmly rooted in, and driven by the needs of, those disadvantaged communities. Below I explore one such example run by Social Action Movement that not only attempts to make Dalit children aware of their exploitation and oppression but also seeks to increase their (collective) bargaining power at village level and in the labour market more widely.

### **Exploring Policy Discourse and Dalit Participation in Learning**

From this brief discussion there are important points that need to be taken into account. Firstly, the disturbing ideas relating to Dalit participation in learning enshrined in early codifications of caste are no longer evidenced in official discourse. Policy has moved a long way since the days when received wisdom dictated that Dalit

children should have their tongues cut out, or molten lead poured in their ears, if they attempted to secure access to learning environments (Jadhav, 2003).

Secondly, the recognition that education is a fundamental human right and should be made available to all children is a very important one. By employing the language of rights a powerful discourse is mobilised that directly challenges caste based assumptions about the inherent supremacy of some children over others. Indian education policy, in this respect, now flies in the face of Manu Dharma not only because the prohibition of Dalit participation in learning has been lifted, but also because initiatives to secure Dalit access to schools and other learning environments are positively promoted. We see this in the attempts to universalise elementary education (e.g. the National Policy on Education, 1986) that specify targets for the enrolment, retention and achievement of Dalit learners.

Thirdly, the policy initiatives have been designed to address the very real problems that operate as barriers to Dalit participation in learning. Below I shall explore in more depth what some of these problems are. For the present purposes we can identify many that are common to marginalised communities across the world – these include the crushing effects of poverty, poor nutrition and health, drought, illiteracy (and other problems associated with low level access to formal learning) in adults and children, large distances that need to be travelled to the nearest school and poor quality teaching-learning transactions in those schools that are available. The various attempts to develop school infrastructure, expand elementary education provision and encourage Dalit children to learn are laudable in that they target tangible needs in the communities. For example the District Primary Education Programme, a World Bank



sponsored scheme launched in the mid-1990s, aimed at operationalising the strategies for achieving Universal Elementary Education through district-specific planning and target setting. Initiatives focussed on both demand and supply side interventions. Village Education Committees were set up to encourage communities to send their children to school, new schools were constructed and resources (learning materials, improved facilities etc) were given to existing schools to reduce drop-out and repetition.

### ***Underlying principles***

It is illuminating to consider the rationale behind such policies and the extent to which an 'Education For All agenda' (emerging from international dialogues such as those held at Jomtien in 1990 or Dakar in 2000) is impacting upon education policy in India. Through such forums the international communities have re-iterated that education is not simply an instrument of social and economic development but also a fundamental human right. The World Bank clearly indicates the areas that have been given funding priority in the following brief on South Asia (September 1999):

“Bank assistance for basic education in India aims to expand enrolment levels and reduce drop out rates, while raising students’ academic performance. Projects focus especially on girls, children from disadvantaged scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, working children, children with disabilities, and other children with limited opportunities to attend primary school. The main project activities are working to increase access, improve classroom instruction, strengthen community participation, and build institutional and management capacity.”

(<http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/sar/sa.nsf/0/3436a2c8a70b8463852567ef0066a42e?OpenDocument>)

Children that have historically been undervalued and prevented from accessing learning are now the focus of bank sponsored projects and these new international drivers of educational policy in India are significant in challenging caste-discrimination. Education For All means *all* children, irrespective of caste, and this message is underscored all the more because it is linked to financial incentive. It would be excessively simplistic (and indeed highly cynical) to suggest that efforts to promote greater equity in education in India are purely the result of a dominant international paradigm or an agenda set by the international donor agencies. The struggle to abolish caste discrimination in Indian education has a far richer history than that. However, it is important to recognise that this EFA agenda has become a motor force in the development of Indian education policy and with it there has been an emphasis on enrolment, retention and achievement to meet the goals and targets that are prioritised. The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) (of which India is a signatory), for example, identifies certain ambitious goals to achieve by 2015 including that all children (especially ‘girls, children in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities’) ‘have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality’ (p. 8)

### ***Critiquing the Enrolment, Retention and Achievement (ERA) discourse***

In earlier chapters I have explored the links that have been made between the transformation of Dalit consciousness and Dalit liberation. Self-determination – the capacity to exercise a reasonable degree of control over the direction in which one’s

life moves and the choices one is able to make – is regarded by many Dalit activists as vital. If education is to have a meaningful impact upon the lives of Dalit children, so the argument goes, it must help them to reflect upon (and challenge) the contradictions and conflicts that perpetuate their exclusion. Otherwise self-determination is severely restricted. Critiquing policies, practices, norms, values and societal conditions that prevent or inhibit such critical reflection is therefore crucial to reducing the barriers to Dalit participation in learning. If government ministers (or international donor agencies) believe that educational success (for Dalits) can be measured by being on the school register and having attained a ‘minimum level of learning’ attention is distracted from the considerably more important goal, at least as far as Dalit children are concerned, of enabling them to perceive for themselves the reasons for their socio-economic disadvantage.

As Vasavi (2003) points out ‘education deprivation in the nation results not only from poverty, but also from pyramidal social relations.’ (p. 74). It is absolutely imperative to take cognisance of this fact. As noted above, there are certain values connected with the Education For All agenda. The notion that education is a fundamental human right and that all children should have equal access to learning environments is perhaps the most important. The problem is that to super-impose an ethical framework like this on a value system (based upon inequality and hierarchy) that has operated for many centuries, indubitably leads to contradictions and conflicts. One of the most significant is that EFA initiatives have tended to address the symptoms of Dalit subjugation (e.g. that they are not in school or that they under-perform) and not done enough to interrogate the cause (i.e. that not everyone has equal value in

society). In the next section I explore some of these symptoms and connect them with a value system that enshrines the principle of separation on the basis of graded purity.

## **Part Two: Dalit Education and Separation**

### **A: Engaging with Schools and their Communities**

Indian education policy therefore needs to engage more meaningfully with the beliefs and values that perpetuate caste discrimination. With this in mind, I now examine in more detail some of the barriers to Dalit participation in learning revealed through my fieldwork engagements. Drawing on interviews with children, parents, schoolteachers, education bureaucrats, non-formal learning centre facilitators and NGO staff I paint a picture of the multiple disadvantages that Dalit children face. As I shall reveal a complex constellation of issues intimately connected with a particular way of valuing human beings are often simply dismissed as the result of poverty.

This ‘rhetoric of poverty’ became a familiar refrain during my visits to schools and their communities and arguably it served to obfuscate a deeper explanation for educational marginalisation. Of course there are many reasons why Dalit children never make it to school in the first place and why only 58.2% of Dalit children, compared to 72.8% of other children between the ages of 6-14 can read and write (UNICEF, 2006 p. 9). Rarely do these factors operate in isolation and the overlapping nature of these multiple deprivations exacerbates the problem. However, many of the barriers to participation in learning that Dalit children face perhaps derive from an unwillingness to mix the ‘pure’ with the ‘impure’. The separation and fragmentation

that conditions caste relationships in India also conditions Dalit experiences of schooling and learning.

In this part of the chapter I draw on my engagement with particular schools and their communities in the Kanchipuram region. School A is a Government Secondary High School (catering for Standards 6-12) in K village. Most of the 1,400 pupils on roll will be from Dalit or low caste communities and a staff of 29 means that, in common with many other schools in India, there is a fairly high pupil-teacher ratio. I talked to the headmaster and some of the teachers and then visited the closest Dalit community with a group of students to observe an evening tuition centre that was run by SAM for these Dalit children.

School B is a Welfare High School (specifically set up to cater for Dalit children between standards 6 and 10) in village R. The school has 1,200 students on roll, a staff of 22 and therefore an even higher pupil-teacher ratio. I observed various classes and also talked to the headmaster and deputy headmaster. I visited the neighbouring Dalit community and talked to parents and children about some of the issues and challenges that confronted them in accessing education.

I also draw on a three-day visit to a private institution called the Teddy School connected to an export industry working in partnership with the Body Shop UK. This school is far better resourced than A and B and has a teaching staff of 17 to cater for only 377 children (all of whom will pay a fee of 100 rupees although children from underprivileged communities are prioritised and are assisted where necessary). These various encounters did not provide me with an in-depth picture of what school is like

on a daily basis for Dalit children however they did enable me to identify some of the many barriers to participation in learning that confront these communities. Crucially I was afforded a small insight into the wide gulf that can exist between schools and the communities that they are supposed to serve.

### ***Distance to school – real and symbolic***

The physical distance to school is often cited as a major reason why many Dalit children are not in school. The headmaster of School A told me that it caters for communities within a 17km radius, children variously walk, cycle or take the bus but since the roads in Tamil Nadu are very dangerous there are many deaths each year. The headmaster explained that earlier in the week a van carrying some children to school had overturned. The cost of transportation to the nearest school is also a problem for such impoverished communities and it is not difficult to understand why state and national governments regard improving school infrastructure as so important.

During my visit to Village R one girl explained that she could not continue with her schooling past 10<sup>th</sup> Standard because of the mobility problems that she experienced and the physical distance between her home and the nearest bus stop (3km away). Furthermore, when one considers that often parents are reluctant to let their female children attend school in other villages (PROBE report 1999, p. 17), particularly once they have attained puberty and eligible to marry, it is clear that distance to the nearest school is an issue that affects Dalit girls more than boys. As such there are special measures that the government has brought in, including the provision of free bicycles

to Dalit girls in standards 11 and 12 so that distance to the nearest high school does not present such a significant barrier.

Dalit children not only face the problems associated with physical distance to school, there is also what Jenkins and Barr (UNICEF, 2006) refer to as ‘social distance’ – the historical exclusion of Dalit communities by separating villages along caste-Hindu/Dalit lines. As we have seen previously, Dalits are segregated and forced to live in separate colonies which mark such communities out as ritually impure.

Invariably the school is located in the part of the village where the higher castes reside and Dalits not only have to contend with, at best a long walk in hot and dangerous conditions, but also the humiliation of crossing lines that separate the pure from the impure. Twice I accompanied a group of Dalit children back from school to their homes. On both occasions I realised that such symbolic distance must be very harmful for them – how can one feel like a valued member of the school community if one is not considered pure enough to live close to that village school? In Chapter Two I provide an extract from my research journal that describes one such journey home; it vividly depicts the anger and bitter resentment that can occur when these lines are permeated. The following is an extract from my research journal documenting the walk back to the Dalit colony with a group of girls who were students at School A:

“Following our conversation with the teachers we accompany seven girls all of whom appear to be in their early teens or younger back to the Dalit colony. They are smartly dressed in the school uniform – a light blue over-garment that comes down to below the knees, dark blue trousers and a dark blue dopatia or neck scarf. The walk back, to my romanticized eyes, is beautiful and interesting. Through the pleasingly windy and green paddy fields that

provide a welcome contrast to the heat and the dust, passing women in bright saris who file by carrying bundles of wood on their head, past the village temple with the impressive statue of the local deity – evocative images that confirmed an India that I held in my imagination. And then the slow realisation...the girls might be smartly dressed but they wear no shoes – a symbol of their ‘untouchable’ status, we are walking back to their homes because their impurity dictates that they are not allowed to dwell in close proximity to the caste Hindu village where the school is located. The paddy fields are not pleasantly verdant settings for strolling in but land owned by the higher castes that employ Dalit labourers who will work for a pittance providing that the rains come, the harvest is not poor and there is enough work. The village deity who is to be propitiated will be a Dalit God because these are the only temples that they can enter that will not cost them a severe beating, ritual humiliation, or perhaps even their lives. Smart uniforms and school enrolment alone will not change this.”

Research Journal 11/3/04)

Reducing the barriers to Dalit participation in learning is about more than facilitating school access by addressing the problem of physical distance – it is also crucial to examine the wide gulf caused by ‘social distance’. The transformation of Dalit consciousness such that ‘social distance’ is perceived as an injustice and not a natural concomitant of village life is imperative.



***Valuing Dalit learning: the high direct and indirect cost of schooling***

Another significant barrier to Dalit participation in learning relates to a constellation of issues surrounding the high direct and indirect cost of schooling. Direct costs include having to purchase essential items (pens, notebooks, textbooks and uniforms), paying tuition fees and meeting any transport costs. The most significant indirect cost is the loss to family income that results from a child who could be working being enrolled in full time education. In addition many children are out of school because they are required to perform domestic duties such as helping with younger siblings or general housekeeping chores.

The PROBE report (1999) published data based on a random sub-sample of 226 never-enrolled children in the 6-12 age group (p. 36). This data suggested that parents, when asked why their children had never been enrolled in school, most frequently responded that it was because schooling was too expensive (43% for boys, 44% for girls). 49% of girls were needed for other activities – of which 82% were involved with domestic work. Of the 26% of boys who were needed for other activities 77% were helping with agricultural work. The report states that the notion of free elementary education (as espoused by the constitution and various policy initiatives) is a ‘myth’ (p. 17) and this is certainly corroborated by some of the comments that I hear from parents and children during my field visits. One mother from a Dalit community whose children attended School A tells me:

*“We are working in the fields and paying the fees in the schools...for the last two years we don’t have any...the lands are really dry and we don’t have enough water to keep the house and also send the children to school...we*

*really want the children to go to school but because of the financial constraints we are not able to send them. ”*

(Research Journal (translation) 11/3/04)

She says that she will try her level best to keep her child in school but it is not easy, she remarks:

*“The government has not given anything to us...everybody is saying the government is giving but they have not given anything to our children...we bought the notebooks and papers and pencils, everything from our own money.”*

(Ibid)

This final point is a very important one, despite policy commitments to providing free education and incentives for Dalit children corruption and inefficiency in service provision often means that these incentives are not delivered upon. This is something that is not just perceived by parents, children are also witness to the corruption that exists in schools. A group of female Dalits students from the Children’s Parliament (see below) protest that ‘they never give us anything free’.

I heard stories about teachers who not only charged for the materials that they were supposed to provide free but also those who charged students to renovate the classrooms and refused to acknowledge when fees had been collected. The mid-day meal scheme, heralded as a major educational incentive by the government of Tamil Nadu, was also subject to corruption and inefficiency – some children did not receive

it at all, others said that ingredients were purloined and sold on or fed to livestock.

One girl neatly encapsulates the problem in the following comment:

*“We have no money that is why we are at government school, how can they expect us to pay more?”* (Research Journal (translation) 3/7/2004)

I would suggest that such practices indicate that the education of Dalit children is not sufficiently valued. Even if it is not true of all teachers, the fact that some perceive initiatives aimed at encouraging Dalit participation in learning as an opportunity to make money speaks volumes about how seriously their education is treated. It is important that Dalit children feel that they are valued in school – such practices do little to communicate this message.

### ***Rhetoric and the replication of norms and values***

The social norms and values that legitimise caste discrimination and inequality are, all too often, replicated and reinforced in classroom practices and teacher attitudes. Quite apart from the overt discrimination suffered by Dalit children in the classroom (for example higher caste teachers making them perform menial tasks or verbally and physically abusing them) there are also more subtle expressions of inequality. Vasavi (2003) refers to a ‘rhetoric of poverty’ used by teachers and education officials to blame parents and poverty for all manner of ills including low school attendance, poor performance and high-drop out rates. Unchallenged, this rhetoric distracts attention from a host of other problems such as high teacher absenteeism, poor infrastructure and inadequate teaching-learning transactions; it provides ‘an escape route to teachers and education officials’ (Vasavi 2003, p. 74). Arguably it is a modern variant of the ancient notion of cosmic inevitability – a fatalism spawned by accepting that this is

‘just the way things are’. It was a rhetoric that became a familiar refrain when I questioned teachers and officials about the most significant barriers to Dalit participation in learning. The District Child-Labour Co-ordinator provided the following explanation for high school drop out levels:

*“The basic reason is home is illiterate...they are not interested to send their children into the school...they don’t know the value of education, they don’t know the value of their children’s health and future also. If you give them fifty rupees it is a very big amount to the parents so they are concentrated only on money not on the real value...on the future, they don’t bother about the future, they don’t know about the health and hygiene of their children. Illiteracy is the main reason.”*

(Interview DCLC27/2/04)

This culture of blame filters down to the teachers, the headmaster of School B made a very similar comment when I asked him why he felt that there was a need for a separate school for Dalit children:

*“Because they are a downtrodden people, their vocation [Dharma?] is not like that, their parents are also not educated so that is why they are not able to give a good education or a good direction to their children. Parents, most probably 90% of SC [Scheduled Caste] parents are illiterate. So they don’t know how to educate the students or how to direct the students in a proper way for their future. So that is why they need a separate school I[...] the government has decided those people are un-educated and illiterate people and that they should be properly catered for by the education. So that is why*

*they are giving more attention to the SC/ST people – they are coming from a downtrodden people, they are coming from illiterate people...”*

(Research Journal HMB25/3/04)

The language that the headmaster uses clearly indicates that he does not see himself as belonging to the same community as these Dalit children and parents – they are a separate ‘people’. When teachers come from different social backgrounds to the children that they are teaching there can be difficulties in relating, or being sensitive, to the needs of the communities that they are ostensibly serving. The word ‘downtrodden’ suggests that the teachers might regard the poverty stricken situation of Dalit communities as an injustice. However, the fact that the blame for educational disadvantage is either laid squarely at the parents’ door, or attributed to widespread poverty, indicates that some teachers might not hold themselves to be responsible for improving the educational opportunities of Dalit children.

### ***Separating poverty and caste discrimination***

It is stating the obvious that poverty plays an enormous role in educational exclusion and the headmaster of School A makes this abundantly clear when he comments:

*“There are three important things in life – food, clothing and shelter – you have to provide all three – then only you can begin to talk about education. People in the area are lacking these three significant things”*

(Research Journal HMA11/3/04)

Parents also acknowledge the crushing impact of low wages and struggling to subsist in an uncertain agricultural economy that is perpetually blighted by drought. One

woman from Village R explained to me that they only get paid fifteen rupees a day to work in the paddy field harvesting the rice which is a staple part of the South Indian diet and a primary source of income for many households. The drought that Tamil Nadu was experiencing at the time of my fieldwork was causing enormous problems – there had only been work for January and February and the poor harvest meant that many people had been out of work during March. The combine harvester that made for attractive video footage as the sun set on the paddy fields swallowed up even more of the jobs. The woman said:

*“Out of that fifteen rupees a day do we eat or do we send our children to school – this is why sometimes we stop our children going to school.”*

(Research Journal (translation) 25/3/2004)

Indubitably, poverty excludes Dalit children from school. However, by failing to link poverty and caste discrimination more explicitly teachers and education officials are guilty of misrepresenting perhaps the most significant barrier to Dalit participation in learning – the fact that not all children (and adults) are equally valued and that there has developed a hierarchy of learning environments that serves to reinforce this structural inequality.

When I spoke to the Chief Education Officer (CEO) and the District Elementary Education Officer (DEEO) of Kanchipuram district neither of them attempted to link poverty and caste discrimination. I asked the CEO what he felt to be the main reasons for school drop out and he simply said ‘socio-economic conditions’ were to blame. As the person with overall responsibility for the administration of education in the district one might have expected a slightly more elaborate answer, but then when he told me

that there were no problems that existed in village schools I realised that this was not going to be a particularly meaningful exchange. If the highest-ranking education official in the district could be so blasé about disadvantage and deprivation – it is perhaps no great surprise that some teachers do not seem to look for deeper explanations for the exclusion of Dalit children and seek to absolve themselves of responsibility by blaming poverty and parents. The DEEO gave me more comprehensive responses to my questions and, although the ‘rhetoric of poverty’ was certainly evident, slightly more subtle explanations for drop out were proffered. Interestingly he broached the subject of poor quality teaching-learning exchanges such that children drop out because they are not interested in what is being taught (an issue that I return to below).

If education officials are cognisant of the fact that some children drop out of school because they are not interested in what is being taught and how it is being taught, the teachers are not afraid of pointing an accusatory finger straight back. The headmaster of School A notes, what he perceives to be, the ‘unrealistic’ expectations that government policy places on them. “*We have many restraints as educators,*” he tells me “*we cannot talk like the politicians*”. When V, my translator and interpreter, broaches the subject of government incentives to help Dalit children he states:

*“Yes of course but [the government] provides free uniforms, free books and free meals only up to eighth standard. There is not enough food provided to give noon-meals to everyone. They have this fixed amount, out of 1382 students just 400 people are taking food.”*

(Research Journal HMA11/3/04)

And so the buck is passed again – it seems that the culture of blame and recrimination is prevalent and until various parties acknowledge their joint responsibility for improving the educational opportunities of Dalit children, Dalit communities may not have very many strong reasons to believe that their education is considered important by educators or government bureaucrats (most of whom will be higher caste). If policies and commitments do little to help Dalit children identify the exploitative norms and values which perpetuate their poverty at best all that will happen is that the cracks will be papered over. Blaming parents and glibly denouncing ‘socio-economic conditions’ as the root cause of educational deprivation is irresponsible because it is, at best, simplistic, at worst deliberately misleading.

### ***The fragmentation of schools and communities***

There are many reasons why schools are not particularly responsive to the needs of Dalit communities and often these will stem from the lack of a particularly meaningful dialogue between the two. Quite apart from the culture of blame there are few links that are actively developed between schools and their communities. Mr S, SAM’s Project Officer explains to me:

*“Though most of the schools are in the midst of the community they don’t have a real link...they don’t interact with the communities. The teachers may have no idea of what is going on in the villages and the villages may not know what is happening in the school. They have parent teacher associations and so on, but how effective they are – there is a big question mark. Parents, they appreciate them in one way, at least they want their children to be educated and you know, they never got any opportunity to go to school and they want*



*their children to go to school. But go to school and do what is the big thing?"*

(Interview MS16/4/04)

As Mr. S notes, there are Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings but the following observation made by the headmaster of School A reveals that he views the relationship as one of dependency rather than mutual support:

*"[The parents] say we send our children to school...you have to watch them...you have to mend their character...we just send the students to school you have to take each and every thing into your hands...you have the responsibility, the parents completely depend upon the school"*

(Research Journal HMA11/3/04)

The following comments from the headmaster of School B also suggest that communication is a one-way flow, an opportunity to instruct the parents rather than talk about issues of mutual concern:

*"At least once every three months we are conducting parent/teacher association meetings...and we are giving direction to the parents. 'We are only giving education from ten o'clock to four o'clock...most of the time they are in your home... so you, the parents, must have an eye on the students, whether he (sic) is studying in his room, the time he is spending in your home is supposed to be time for studies. You should not allow the students for doing other works or connection with other friends'..."*

(Research Journal HMB25/3/04)

One mother from Village K, who is a PTA member, tells me that when certain problems are raised at these meetings such as the failure to provide free materials the ‘culture of blame’ emerges. She has been told that the school takes children from eighteen villages and the government only supplies schools with limited resources so that they can only give materials to the really needy children. The headmaster of School B, however, asserts that the parents do not bring concrete issues to their PTA meetings:

*“The parents they give no issues like that – they ask only that we give a good education and that their children must study well. That is the only aim they expect of the teachers...they are saying like that – so we are giving a good education for the children. It is a good relationship we are having with the parents...all of the parents.”*

(Research Journal HMB25/3/04)

Again it appears that PTA meetings are little more than a monologue and do not appear to be seen as serious opportunities for schools to understand the difficulties that the local communities face. Perhaps the caste-based desire to keep the pure separate from the impure has much to do with the fragmentation that occurs between schools and the Dalit communities that they are ostensibly there to serve. More meaningful dialogue might provide an opportunity to break down some of the barriers to participation in learning that Dalit communities face.

Despite the fact that some comments made by teachers suggest that opportunity for empathy may be distinctly lacking – other teachers are able to examine their own experience of schooling to reach out and respond to the needs of their pupils. The Tamil teacher at School A was himself an ex-pupil and therefore able to think about

some of the issues in a more reflexive way. He told me that he had been the first person in his village to finish schooling and he felt that he had been fortunate in having had a mother who encouraged his education despite the premature death of his father:

*“Like me...I am fatherless after ninth standard...afterwards my mother, she used to take care of my study. She was a labourer. I completed here in the 11<sup>th</sup> standard then I completed teacher training. Some parents are very eager to educate their children to develop their life. I had this thing in my mind and heart that I had to study, I had to do everything – in those days there were no correspondence courses so I had to go here, there, everywhere to buy and collect books to read.”*

(Research Journal TT11/3/04)

This particular teacher felt that there is a greater awareness of the value of education in the communities than existed when he was a child, a general belief that the children should *‘not struggle the way that we have done’*.

Talking to a group of parents in Village R this was clearly evidenced. The parents felt that education is important for their children, not only to improve their opportunities for living a happier life but also to increase their chances of finding employment and earning more money. When I ask why they think schooling is important I am met with a variety of obvious responses *‘to earn money’*; *‘to live their life happily’*; *‘to provide food’*. However, during this brief discussion it became very clear to me that since many parents will only have received a rudimentary formal education themselves they cannot be expected to have a more nuanced understanding of exactly how education might benefit their children. I asked the parents to imagine that they were in charge of

the school – what would they want their children to learn? After a long pause and some bemused expressions one man said to me:

*“Many of us have not gone to school so how can we know? If we are not educated how can you expect us to run a school?”*

(Research Journal (translation) 3/25/04)

This humbling encounter helped me to realise just how fundamental the fragmentation between schools and communities could be. It brought home the profound importance of making schools more responsive to the needs of the local community by encouraging dialogue. Dialogue increases the likelihood of a deeper understanding of what Jenkins and Barr (2006) call the ‘relationship and interplay between the school, community and household’. They point out that:

*“...there is an interplay between life situations, school functioning, classroom practices, community norms, parental aspirations and other factors which have an influence on educational outcomes of disadvantaged groups.”* (p. 13)

### ***The disjunction between aspiration and opportunity***

Another significant, and related, barrier to Dalit participation in learning is the disparity between aspiration and opportunity that exists, particularly in rural communities. If parents believe that education can secure a better life for their children, teachers are far more pragmatic about the opportunities that are available.

The headmaster of School A stated:

*“Suppose a boy completes his twelfth year plus two. He doesn’t have any guarantee that he will get a job, any job. He has to do the same work as his parents. For some, some hope is there – in future they may get a good chance*

*to survive. But primarily this is the plight of the whole of India.”*

(Research Journal HMA11/3/04)

The Tamil teacher at School A also explained that, once the children finish the 8<sup>th</sup> Standard, there are strong pressures for them to follow their parents into the rice mills or paddy fields – the mainstay of the local economy. He argues that the parents see little point in paying to extend their children’s education much further if it simply delays the inevitable.

Some of the children are less negative (but more unrealistic) about their hopes for the future. Talking to a group of Dalit children from Village K between the ages of 8 and 14, I learn that they are clearly ambitious. When asked what they want to do after they leave school they shout out a plethora of jobs associated with prestige and status – lawyers, doctors, teachers, police officers, district administrators, one young boy tells me with a wry smile on his face that he wants to be Chief Minister for Tamil Nadu. The problem is that the individual aspirations of these children, and even the far more down to earth aspirations of their parents, do not match the social norms and expectations of the wider community. Nothing very much is expected of Dalit children even if they do make it into school and once again one is reminded of the fatalistic attitudes that the caste system imbues. If Dalit children are to participate in learning more effectively it is imperative that the social norms of the wider community are challenged. In the next section I reflect on some experiences that gave me an insight into government schooling in India – these learning environments that predominantly cater for the lower echelons of society seem to provide little

opportunity for providing Dalit children with the kind of skills necessary to challenge caste discrimination.

### **B: Dalit Experience in Schools: Preventing Critical Self-Reflection**

As the PROBE report notes ‘different types of schooling opportunities are accessible to different sections of the population’ (1999, p. 50) and it is unsurprising that the government schools that Dalit children predominantly have access to are less well resourced and managed than the private institutions that cater for the more privileged. This is not always the case, as my experiences at Teddy School (an innovative privately funded school in Tamil Nadu) indicate, but arguably it is generally true. Even the most superficial of visits to a rural government school indicates how disingenuous the CEO was being when he stated that village schools have no problems.

My first visit to a government primary school about 100km outside Chennai did reveal some very encouraging practices which were partly the result of good partnership working with NGOs promoting more inclusive practices and partly the result of a head teacher that was very committed to procuring resources for his school from alternative sources (including local companies). Nevertheless many of the problems highlighted in the PROBE report were clearly in evidence. High pupil-teacher ratios; noisy, stuffy, dark and cramped classrooms; instruction based on regurgitation rather than more active forms of learning and insufficient resources are all hinted at in the following extract from my research journal:

*“The school consisted of three buildings. The first building was a slightly dilapidated one storey concrete structure overlooked by a substantial*

*Tamarind tree. Inside the classroom was stuffy and poorly ventilated. The room was not particularly well lit and only a small amount of natural light came through the tiny windows and open door. There were some tatty pictures up on the wall although I didn't pay close attention to these. The room was partially partitioned and at one end a helper was taking the first standard children (age 5) for a lesson. There were a good many children who had hearing aids. In the middle of the classroom standard three was being given a lesson in Tamil (the local language). And at the far end there were chairs for Standard 5 which was having an English lesson. There was only one teacher and one helper for the three different classes – and the teacher would divide his time between standard three and five. All of the lessons that were being taught revolved around the children regurgitating what the teacher had said in parrot fashion or chorusing back an automated response in unison. I am told that the head teacher is very committed to improving school facilities – he had procured corporate funding which had enabled him to get some benches for the classroom which the 3<sup>rd</sup> standard kids were sitting at. The children from first standard were sitting on the floor and there were some desks for the fifth standard children although not many. It seemed that the school was lucky in that all the children had their own textbooks (which I was told was highly unusual in Government run rural schools. There were significant number of children with disabilities (some with Cerebral Palsy, some visually and hearing impaired) again I was told that this was not representative of rural schools and was attributable to the hard work of U [a local NGO working with disabled children] and presumably the receptivity of the teachers to more inclusive practices.*

(Research Journal VS1 11/2/03)

As noted previously there is a strong policy commitment to enrol Dalit children in schools such as this one as part of the EFA agenda. However, if the schools that they have access to are generally poorly resourced, overcrowded and provide little stimulus for critical reflection then, even when the teachers are reliable and enthusiastic, school environments will do little to challenge the systematic exclusions that result from unequal social relationships. If higher caste children invariably access the better resourced and managed private institutions/tuition then one wonders whether the public school system slowly evolving into schooling with a majority Dalit and low caste intake is yet another example of caste discrimination by stealth. Interestingly one 15 year old Dalit girl who enthuses about the tuition provided in an evening study centre that SAM has set up in her village (see below) is very aware of the divisive impact of private education which she perceives as something that goes on ‘outside’ the Dalit community:

*“The students who come here, we do not have a lot of money to go outside to take up private tuition, this tuition is very useful, very useful for students like us because we can’t pay money to outsiders.”*

(Research Journal (translation) 11/3/04)

### ***Docile minds and disciplined bodies***

Government schools find it hard to retain Dalit pupils and minimising drop out is certainly a significant governmental strategy for improving education. According to Government of India statistics 41.47% of Dalit children dropped out of school in the primary phase in 2002-03, compared to 34.89% (all categories) (Quoted in UNICEF, 2006, p. 22). There are many reasons why Dalit children drop out of school – some of



these will be peculiar to the lives of Dalit children, others will hold more generally for children from poor backgrounds in low quality schools.

One significant problem relates to the quality of teaching-learning transactions that occur in government schools and as the District Elementary Education Officer notes above children not only drop out ‘for economic reasons’ but also because they are discouraged with the schools and the teachers. Lessons fail to stimulate and children are easily bored by a rigid and uninspiring curriculum that is delivered using outmoded pedagogical techniques. I am frequently told that there is a ubiquitous perception amongst teachers, children and parents that good schooling is about cramming, rote learning and examination success. The heavy emphasis placed on textbook tuition and passing exams is something that is flagged up by Father M in our final interview:

*“...the teachers and the parents – both of them believe that education is, you know, just telling people what is in the book and writing that in the exam and getting pass marks. They don’t bother about educating the children in other ways.”*

(Interview FM16/4/04)

It is therefore little wonder that many children do not find going to government schools particularly stimulating. One twelve year old girl working as a bonded labourer in a silk loom explained to me, as she wound silk thread in a series of smooth repetitive motions that had clearly been well-rehearsed, that she had dropped out of school in the fifth standard because she had not been a good student and did not find anything that she learnt there either relevant or interesting. It is a sad indictment of

government schooling that any child could even claim that working twelve hours a day in dirty and depressing conditions was preferable to being in school.

### ***Some reflections on classroom observation***

Observing some lessons in School B helped me to understand the girl's perspective more clearly. Quite apart from the dilapidated surroundings that do little to enhance the learning experience the transmission of knowledge is seen as a one-way flow from teacher to pupils. There are few opportunities for critical reflection on what is being taught and the only interactions that occur are when the children chorus a response to a question or write an answer on the blackboard. The teacher centric and blackboard focused classroom layout suggest an antiquated pedagogic model and there seem to be few opportunities for the children to actively engage with each other. As I recorded after analysing some video footage that I took during an observation session:

*“The first classroom that I observe has two rows of eight benches which face towards the front where there is a desk, chair and large blackboard for the teachers’ use. The walls are grimy and the faded, curling sheets of paper that decorate them do little to enhance the environment. The posters on display seem mostly to be instructional ones; they are not attractively presented and are so close to the ceiling it hardly seems likely that the children could derive much benefit from them. However, unlike other classrooms, at least they break up the monotony of the dirty walls.*

*The boys, in white shirts and khaki shorts sit on the left hand side of the classroom, the girls, in white blouse and dark green saris sit on the right.*

*Since there were not enough benches for everyone approximately one third of the children sit cross-legged on the floor which was pock marked and dusty.*

*I sit at the back of the class on a bench that I have to myself. Is this why a good proportion of the class are seated on the floor? I am aware that my presence is disruptive – the video camera serves as a useful tool for capturing observational detail but perhaps also does much to contribute to the ‘stage managed’ delivery of the 9<sup>th</sup> standard social sciences lesson which the deputy headmaster gives.*

*Not understanding Tamil I realise that I miss out on a considerable amount of information and only ascertain that most of the lesson has to do with using statistics to produce pie charts. Maths and statistics not being my strong points I try hard not to let the subject matter jaundice my view. However, I am able to make some rudimentary observations. The lesson is largely of a ‘chalk and talk’ variety and at regular intervals the children copy what is being written on the board or transcribe something from their textbooks. A significant proportion of the teacher’s time is spent with his back to the class writing on the blackboard. Questions are fired at the class and responses are regurgitated in chorus. It is not possible to ascertain which students are participating in the lesson and which are sitting silent therefore it seems unlikely that a teacher would be able to gauge individual children’s comprehension. It strikes me that the teacher seems to be directing most of his questions and attention to the boys. After the class V tells me she also had this impression. Although some of the children have text books on their laps not*

*all do and many have torn pages and are missing covers. It is quite evident that these schools suffer from severe resource constraints, but since many schools in India lack desks, benches and water sources this is certainly not one of the worst.*

*The children, sitting in a disciplined fashion, for the most part do seem to be paying attention to the teacher but they do not seem engaged in what is being taught, some of the girls in the back row are talking amongst themselves. One gets the impression that both the teacher and the children are ‘going through the motions’ – in my research journal I recorded:*

**About 15 minutes into the class the teacher suddenly says ‘do you want to observe another class’. I am struck by how stage managed the presentation seems to be – I get the feeling that we are being shown what the school wants us to see and probably not what the school is like on a daily basis. However it is interesting in that this is presumably an indication of what the teacher feels is an ideal learning scenario – an example of best practice. I say that I would like to see an English lesson because I might be able to follow the lesson a little better. What happens next is quite bizarre. The teacher enters a maths class and says something to the maths teacher who then leaves. In the middle of the maths lesson the teacher begins an English exercise. The kids look bemused but dutifully reach for their exercise books and start copying out what the teacher is writing on the board. I learn that the children have a maths exam tomorrow and I feel very guilty for disrupting their schedule. We**

**try to ask the DHM to let the lesson carry on as normal but he continues regardless.”** (Research Journal SBO29/3/04)

***Restricting independent thought***

As the PROBE report indicates such lessons provide ‘no stimulation for a thinking mind to develop or for self-confidence to grow’ (1999, p. 52). Children’s minds are treated like blank slates to be written on and manipulated rather than nurtured and cultivated and this is deeply disturbing when one considers that a docile mind prevents Dalit children from questioning and challenging their systematic subjugation. Furthermore in this type of learning environment where knowledge transmission is a one-way process from teacher to pupil there is very little room for children developing the capacity for independent or self-determined thought and action.

This is clearly evidenced by contrasting two instances of teacher absenteeism that I came across at two very different schools. The first occurred at The Teddy School a private institution that had been working in partnership with Vidya Sagar to develop more inclusive pedagogy and practice. As well as ‘mainstreaming’ disabled children, they were also experimenting with more interesting teaching-learning methods. These included peer-to-peer tutoring; changes in classroom layout (children seated around tables rather than facing the blackboard in regimented rows) and innovative approaches to the curriculum such as the use of drama, role-play and experiential learning (I observed one lesson on solar energy which began with children burning holes in paper with a magnifying glass). During my three-day visit to the Teddy school I recorded the following observation in my journal:

*“During the day when we are observing one class M [an outreach worker from Vidya Sagar doing consultancy work] asks me to come and watch a class where the teacher was absent – she had told the children that she would be away (std v) and that they should get together and do some revision on their own. She had used some innovative approaches in the past – peer tutoring, child-focussed learning, mixed ability groups that take collective responsibility for their work and helping slower learners. A teacher had apparently gone to check up on the class and did not want to disturb them because they were happily engaged in revision and they had decided to revise by using a drama exercise that involved the whole class. Apparently some of these children also get together on their own initiative after class they meet in the school playground and help those children who are taking longer to learn.”*

(Research Journal TSO19/2/2003)

In stark contrast to these children who were able to take control of their own learning in their teacher’s absence, I encountered a class from School B who were at a complete loss when their teacher was not there. The following is an extract from my research journal:

*“Whilst I am sitting observing another class V [interpreter/translator] goes to talk to a group of children whose teacher is absent. It seems no provision has been made for the children to work in the teacher’s absence and it is a stark contrast to the class that I observed in Teddy school. I ask who will be taking the lesson today – V tells me ‘nobody’ – they are just sitting there and don’t know what to do with themselves.”*

*(Research Journal SBO29/3/2004)*

### ***Punishment and the disciplining of bodies***

If an uninspiring curriculum, outmoded pedagogic techniques and the subtle operation of discriminatory attitudes and practices conspire to render the minds of Dalit children more docile, then the ubiquitous use of corporal punishment will have an equally coercive effect on Dalit bodies. The humiliation and punishment of children in schools is not something that just affects Dalit communities but it is certainly experienced by them particularly acutely. In Chapter Five, I quote an extract from Valmiki's autobiography (2003) which talks about the discrimination and abuse that he faced in school as a Dalit child growing up in newly independent India (i.e. after the constitutional abolition of Untouchability and the promotion of Dalit education in Article 46).

Punishment is not only seen as a means of reprimanding children who have misbehaved, thereby moulding their character and encouraging their 'moral development', it is also viewed as a method for 'curing children of the congenital malady of ignorance' (Tagore, 1961, p. 63). Observing in schools the cane is ever present and is frequently used by teachers to bring the children into line. The headmaster of School A offers the following reflections on the use of corporal punishment despite my not having broached the subject with him. We were talking about the purpose of education and whether school enables children to become 'good human beings':

*"For sure – they learn much how to become a good student, how to move with other people. Of course there is some slack –there is some drop out, that is due to society – social pressure (talks in Tamil)...we want to create a model*

*society in the school. At times we have to use some brutal methods...(Tamil)...we don't beat students just to quench our sadistic pleasure, the main thing is to send him through the right path...at times we have to beat them."*

(Research Journal HMA11/3/04)

During my second visit to School B I saw a very graphic illustration of the type of humiliation that is used to keep children in their place. Two boys had been kicked out of a classroom I had been observing in earlier (I think that they may have been playing up to the camera and I felt guilty about the role that I indubitably played in their punishment). They had been made to kneel in an uncomfortable position outside the entrance at the front of the school in the blazing mid-day sun. I saw this because I happened to be observing a lesson that was being conducted outside under the shade of a tree (I was sweating and uncomfortable despite being able to sit how I wanted). Subsequent to my visit, I was given a copy of a fact-finding report jointly produced by Tamil Nadu Child Rights Protection Network, Social Action Movement and Dalit Sena that investigated a similar incident at another 'Dalit welfare' school in the district. 15 Dalit students had sustained considerable injury after having been made to walk around the school on their knees – the punishment that I had observed was clearly not an isolated incident.

After talking to the children from the Welfare School whose teacher was absent I made the following entry in my research journal:

*"I change tack and say to the group – 'I saw two children being punished – what do they think about that?' One child says that she thinks that the punishment is wrong – if they do anything wrong then they should be*



*scolded but not made to kneel down in the sun, or if they persist then they [the teachers] should have to go and report to their parents. I ask if any of the children here have had to kneel down like the two boys that I had seen earlier. A few children say that they have. I ask how it made them feel. One boy said – ‘when I do the punishment I feel that I should not make the same mistake’. ‘But how does it make them feel about kneeling in front of the whole school?’ I ask. A few children comment and V tells me that they feel very bad, guilty, ashamed, and that they will go back to the teacher and promise not to do it again.*

*I ask if any of the children have had to do the punishment more than once.*

*There follows a fairly animated conversation – but it transpires that a few of them have had this punishment meted out more than once. I ask what about the stick – how often do they use it? One child says if they make any mistake I ask whether in their written work or in their behaviour. V tells me if they write badly they get beaten, if they read badly they get beaten. It is not just a discipline thing it is also about how well they perform in their studies.”*

(Research Journal SBO29/3/2004)

If Dalit children have their minds and bodies disciplined in such a fashion it is difficult to see how such learning environments will furnish them with the capacity to critically reflect on, and challenge, structural inequalities and caste discrimination. And without this capacity Dalit liberation will be an unrealistic goal, no matter how many educational initiatives attempt to facilitate their access to schooling. Of course children from all caste backgrounds are subject to corporal punishment and I saw its

use in the Teddy School as well as government schools but perhaps this is part of the problem – it is seen as such a natural part of the instruction and correction of children that education is often a matter of ‘disciplining and moulding’ rather than ‘nurturing and stimulating’ and this approach to learning is profoundly unhealthy. Particularly if critical minds prepared to challenge the status quo are required to end oppressive practices. These are precisely the kind of minds that SAM is trying to cultivate.

### **Part Three: Social Action Movement, Education and the Transformation of Dalit Consciousness**

In Chapter Six I consider certain core elements of the SAM modus operandi and note that a great deal of importance is attached to educating Dalit children and adults in such a way that they are able to identify and challenge the conflicts and contradictions inherent in a caste-conscious society. Given that Dalits were historically excluded from participation in formalised learning environments improving access to schools is a powerful symbolic assertion of the inalienable ‘right’ of Dalit children to receive an education. As such SAM does a great deal to enable children to exercise that right. However, SAM also works vigorously to develop alternative centres of learning which are seen as crucial elements in the struggle for Dalit liberation. All of SAM’s educational initiatives are based upon the principle that Dalit participation in learning is instrumental in challenging the structures that enslave Dalit communities. The issue of bonded labour, perhaps more than any other barrier to Dalit participation in learning, reveals why the liberation of Dalit consciousness is so profoundly important.

## **Bonded Child Labour in the Silk Looms of Kanchipuram**

One of the most disturbing consequences of caste inequality that I encountered during my fieldwork was the issue of bonded labour – for me it epitomised everything that SAM was fighting against and exemplified why the transformation of Dalit consciousness was so urgent. The Human Rights Watch report *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables"* defines bonded labour as:

“Work in slave like conditions in order to pay off a debt. Due to the high interest rates charged and the abysmally low wages paid, the debts are seldom settled. Bonded labourers are frequently low-caste, illiterate, and extremely poor, while the creditors/employers are usually higher caste, literate, comparatively wealthy, and relatively more powerful members of the community.” (1999, p. 139)

Kanchipuram city itself, 80 kms west of Chennai, is famous for a number of reasons. It is one of the seven holiest cities in India, known as the city of a thousand temples, tradition has it that if one visits Kanchipuram one is assured of enlightenment in this lifetime. On a less esoteric level it is also famed for its high quality silk saris. A report by RIDE, a local Anti-Child Labour NGO, estimates that 75% of Kanchipuram's 3.38 million population (2001 Census) is dependent on the silk sari industry and between 45-55,000 children are involved. Hand loom owners (known as master weavers) do fairly well out of the business, whether they are affiliated to the government co-operatives or private traders they can earn between 1,000 and 4,000 rupees per month. However the families that the master weavers contract the work to may do less well. In these family homes between three and five looms will be set up and there will usually be one adult and one child involved in the weaving process. Since the normal

working day is twelve hours long (sixteen during periods of high demand such as festivals) and the children are employed seven days a week, formal schooling is out of the question. But this is only the beginning of the problem. Most child labourers are little more than slaves, their average monthly wage, between 80 – 250 rupees will invariably be subject to deductions towards the repayments of loans that were taken by the child's parents, from the loom owner, to pay for weddings, medical emergencies or simply just subsisting. The enormous potential for health problems (physical injury, eye disorders, spinal problems etc) and the verbal and physical abuse that the children often face compound the difficulties.

### ***Combating Child Labour***

To combat the problems of bonded labour SAM have launched a Programme Against Child Labour in Kanchipuram city. In 2003 the programme conducted a study of 235 child labourers in the region. The children ranged between the ages of 6 and 14 although the majority were in the 13-14 years bracket. 65% had dropped out at primary school level, 17% at middle school, less than 1% had reached high school and approximately 18% of the children had never attended school. Of the 235 children interviewed, nearly 83% of them were labouring under conditions of bondage after taking loans from the loom owners. 81% of the children were working 12 or more hours per day for 300 rupees or less (10% were paid less than 100 rupees per month – slightly over one pound). Verbal and physical abuse was widely reported, 172 children said that they received scolding whilst 44 children said that they had been beaten. 2 children reported that they were not allowed to eat and 22 children said they had been prevented from going outside during working hours. Many of the children had been deprived of basic amenities and rights including rest periods, lunch breaks,

toilet facilities, drinking water, light and ventilation. Over 200 children reported that they were not given a lunch break or drinking water.

One particularly tragic incident puts a face to these figures. During our interview, Mr R tells me about a boy whom he had been working with named Tamilarasan (which translated means king of the Tamils). At thirteen he was the eldest of three children all of whom had been sent to the silk looms to work because the family was so poor. His parents had taken a loan of three thousand rupees from a loom owner and a monthly wage of 200 rupees was agreed. After working for about two years his skills had attracted the attention of another loom owner who offered his father a 5,000-rupee loan and a monthly salary of 250 rupees. Tamilarasan's father took the loan but after failing to pay the original loom owner his money back Tamilarasan was abducted, accused of stealing 500 rupees from the loom owners house and then beaten and tortured. Semi conscious the boy was handed over to the local police but a day later his body was found in a deserted spot about 2 km from his home.

### ***SAM interventions and facilitating the participation of bonded labourers in learning***

SAM have implemented a number of initiatives and schemes aimed at either preventing children from falling into bonded labour in the first place or rehabilitating those that do. 'Awareness raising' plays a big part in facilitating the participation of Dalit children in school and learning. Parents and children are organised into self-help groups, protest rallies challenge injustices such as Tamilarasan's death and campaigning is done where child labour is prevalent.

Other schemes aim at rehabilitating bonded labourers. Interventions include releasing child labourers from the looms by SAM raising the money to pay their debts and then placing them in regular schools and evening tuition centres which serve as bridge schools preparing children who are still working for (re) entry into mainstream schooling. These evening learning centres provide opportunities for bonded labourers to participate in learning when formal schooling is denied them. Held between 7 and 9 in the evening they provide basic literacy and numeracy for the children, however given that most children have been working for twelve hours previously it is not surprising that many do not avail themselves of these services.

At an evening tuition centre I spoke to a girl and her father and their story provides a graphic illustration of the enormous challenges that such Dalit communities face. The girl was thirteen and had been working in the looms for the last six years, she told me that she finds the basic education she receives at the centre useful because it is helping her to read and write but she does not envisage a life outside of silk weaving ‘it is all that I know’ she tells me. Her father has been working in the silk looms for the last 35 years and explains that when he was six years old his father passed away and he was forced into the looms. He had wanted desperately to send his daughter to school but when he had taken her to enrol they had been turned away because they did not have the necessary documentation (a birth certificate and Scheduled Caste Certificate to prove that she was entitled to free schooling). He believes that the education his daughter receives at the tuition centre is very valuable ‘she will not be able to go to school’ he says with resignation ‘but if she is able to read and write that is important’.

***Bondage and freedom – critical self-reflection and the transformation of Dalit consciousness***

Bonded labour stands as a stark symbol of Dalit subjugation and one of the most pernicious examples of the barriers to participation in learning that Dalit children face. The cruel conditions which lock bonded labourers into servitude and prevent them from accessing schools, unsurprisingly have a profoundly negative impact on a child's self-esteem and induce a fatalism that prevents them from more critical thought. Mr R was clearly saddened by the attitude that the female bonded labourer whom I refer to above adopts towards schooling. He explained to me that this was the first time that he had met her. He was hoping to encourage her in future to see the value of education by telling her some motivational stories showing the impact of bonded labour on children's lives. He conceded '*we don't properly educate them through our schools*' however he did feel that the majority of the children would prefer to study, '*...only some children say that they are more interested in working but these are rare cases.*'

Perhaps the girl's hostile attitude towards schooling was the result of a learning environment that had failed to sufficiently stimulate her but there are other reasons that might also have contributed to her negativity. Mr R tells me in an interview:

*"The children are kept under difficult conditions, they work twelve hour shifts from 7 until 7. Conditions are bad...safety and facilities are poor. They get scolded frequently – and are beaten if they make mistakes with their weaving. Because of these conditions the children become depressed. They get used to these conditions...moulded into this kind of thing – shouted at and beaten up when they are working and don't show any interest in education or have any*

*awareness of how education helps. They don't have any idea about what is outside their life in the looms.”* (Interview (translation) MR27/2/04)

This is why SAM believe that it is so important for Dalit children to think for themselves, critically reflect upon their lives and life chances, and challenge the very institution that perpetuates their servitude – caste. Only by throwing off the shackles of caste consciousness and learning to see the inherent cruelty of a rigidly hierarchical society, argue SAM, can Dalit children be agents in their own emancipation. It is therefore critically important to link Dalit participation in learning with the kind of self-reflective inquiry aimed at the transformation of Dalit consciousness.

### ***Supplementary Education Centres (SEC)***

Given that Dalit children face significant pressures to drop out of school SAM have set up evening tuition centres to provide additional support to Dalit children by reinforcing what they are learning in schools. The evening study centres are an invaluable aid to children in villages where there are no electric lights in the homes (thereby rendering homework impossible). SAM provides a light and a voluntary teacher (drawn from the local community and rarely educated beyond 12<sup>th</sup> standard) and the children come to study for 2 1/2 hours after school. One of the positive effects of embedding these study centres in the local community is that it generates an awareness of the value and importance of education – something that SAM are keen to impress upon parents and children alike. SAM's cultural co-ordinator took me to see the largest centre that they operated which catered for 135 children spread over almost the entire spectrum of school going age (between 1<sup>st</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Standard). I am



told that prior to setting up the centres it is crucial to inculcate an interest in education in the community:

*“We tell the parents that education is very important – please send your children to the evening study centres. All the students know education is important. We have to increase the interest in education first, and then we can start the study centres.”*

(Research Journal VC11/3/04)

SECs not only benefit Dalit communities by stimulating an awareness of the importance of, and demand for, education but also by providing learning environments that are responsive to the needs of those local communities. Unlike private education they are free, located at the heart of the village community and, crucially, facilitated by volunteers who are committed to the work and ideology of Social Action Movement. However, SECs also play a strategic role for SAM since they serve as recruiting grounds for perhaps their most ambitious non-formal education initiative – the Children’s Parliament.

### **The Children’s Parliament (CP): Dalit children and *Praxis***

The CP is essentially an exercise in participatory democracy for young Dalits in the Kanchipuram district. According to Mr S (SAM project Officer) there are CPs set up in approximately 50 villages that cater for children between the ages of six and seventeen. The children are volunteers from the supplementary education centres who, once enlisted are grouped into units of approximately thirty and referred to as Members of Parliament. After an initial training session on the aims and objectives of the project the children elect (through secret ballot) seven MPs to specific portfolios. Each of these different portfolios has particular responsibilities, for example the

Education Minister focuses on issues relating to school drop out, child labour and the conditions that prevail in local schools

In each village the CP meets once a week to discuss local concerns and to deliberate upon a collective course of action. To assist the children and co-ordinate proceedings an ‘animator’, or facilitator, is drawn from the local community – usually a young adult who is happy to give their time on a voluntary basis and who is then trained by SAM. Once a month at SAM headquarters there are ministerial meetings aimed at feeding back village level developments.

According to the vision statement ‘Empowering rural children in participatory Democracy and Governance’ (2001):

“Education is empowerment. The formal education within school walls hardly empowers children to effect any desired social change, rather it makes them agents of maintaining the status quo. In the present situation, while realizing the importance of formal education, we also propose an additional syllabus of education outside the school premises, in villages, at children’s convenience and in small groups of twenty to twenty five children. The additional syllabus of education will see them as leaders, who will believe in alternative system of transparent and participatory, truly democratic governance” (p. 1-2)

In a sense then, the CP is consonant with SAM’s other people building initiatives – it is an attempt to inspire children from disadvantaged communities to collective action and consciousness. As a part of this process one of the aims is to inculcate in Dalit children a capacity to critically reflect upon the world about them from, what SAM

refer to as, a ‘social justice’ perspective. This entails not only considering issues at the micro/local (village, district, state) level but also at the macro (national and global) level. Critical reflection is then to be followed by transformative action – *praxis* in the Freirian sense of the word.

My discussion with Father M immediately after a meeting of the Education Ministers revealed that he was delighted with the capacity that the children were developing to think in a critical manner and act for themselves on the basis of this reflection:

*“I think the children are becoming very vocal and they are also able to think. I was very happy with the clarity with which they were able to think. It is not so easy for children of that age and from a rural background. I was very happy with the way that they raised the issue of school drop out. They take responsibility and say, in order, what steps they would take if a child in their village drops out. They are able to enumerate the steps they would take. And if there is some other kind of wrong thing or a mistake in the school administration or in the food distribution they are able to say what they will do even if some beating up takes place they are ready to face it. So it means people, children are really understanding slowly that they are the real leaders for tomorrow, they have a responsibility all these kind of ideas they are really grasping.”*

(Interview FM7/3/04)

One objective of the Children’s Parliament is to equip children with the skills necessary to become leaders. This entails that they not only take control of their own lives but also respect and value the lives of others by participating in dialogue and learning to think and act collectively. Father M comments:

*“At every level leaders are needed and these are the children that are going to take up different kinds of positions. So we want them to go through a process where they understand that they are the leaders they should understand the process of leadership and they should go with deep value and belief in the democratic system. So tomorrow they will respect others, their ideas, their cultures, their thinking and then decisions will be made in a community oriented, integrated plan....so I think that is helping them, you can see already they have respect for each other, they are able to think together, act together, then maybe it will lead to deciding together.”* (Interview FM7/3/04)

Collective decision-making and action is a powerful mechanism for challenging caste discrimination and oppression and the dialogue that is facilitated between children of various villages is designed to raise the consciousness of young Dalits so that they refuse to passively accept their subjugated status.

### ***Observing at a Meeting of the Education Ministers***

During one visit to SAM headquarters I sat in on a meeting of The Education Ministers. They had conducted a basic survey of school drop out in their villages and were feeding back the findings. The children had looked at the number; gender; age of and, reason for, school dropouts in their village and statistics were collated from the twenty-six villages that had conducted the survey. Children from other villages were also present and were able to contribute to the discussion that followed. Only the number and gender of dropouts were reported and the figures perhaps do not reveal much that would interest a statistician. One village had a disproportionate number of male dropouts (10m and 2f) but then the next village that fed back had a

disproportionate number of female dropouts (6f and 2m). From the 26 villages that completed the survey in total there were 44 boys and 40 girls who had dropped out. One would need to look at the size of the village before one could determine what percentage of school age children were dropping out in each village. As a number crunching exercise there was perhaps little of real significance from the survey results other than the fact that, with the exception of four villages, school drop out was reported to affect each community to a lesser or greater extent.

By far the most interesting insights arose during the discussion that followed the statistical collation. The children elaborated upon the reasons for drop out and some of the difficulties that they experienced in school (some of which I have discussed above such as corruption and inefficiency in service provision). Although the facilitator had thought of some basic questions to ask the children the discussion soon developed a life of its own. The children frequently became animated and although I could not follow the dialogue because it was conducted in Tamil one could sense the enthusiasm with which they spoke. My translator also remarked on the eloquence with which the children articulated their thoughts. This was a far cry from the singsong regurgitation of turgid textbook lessons I had encountered in government school classrooms.

Various issues were broached that provided an illustration of many of the barriers to Dalit participation in learning that I have touched upon above. I heard of health-related issues - one boy who could not continue his schooling because of an eye injury, another boy with cerebral palsy had dropped out of school but was benefiting from the evening tuition centre that SAM had set up in his village. Many of the

children talked about the pressures they face in their communities to leave school and either find work, or for the girls, get married once they reach puberty. The problems themselves are not unique to these communities, however the solutions that the children came up with themselves were profoundly interesting. For example the education minister from one Children's Parliament explained that all the members contribute 2 rupees a month towards the facilitation costs. When they had heard of a boy in their village who had dropped out of school they visited his parents and tried to encourage them to send him back to school. The parents explained that they could not afford the fees and so the ministers collectively decided to pool their subscription fees to help towards the costs. Other children petitioned the head teacher at their school when the mid-day meal scheme was not operating smoothly (grain was being sold to outsiders and the meal watered down, maggots were found in the food and not everyone was being given a meal).

Such episodes reveal that through educational initiatives like the Children's Parliament Dalit children are exploring, critiquing and taking collective action to overcome, the injustices that they face in schools and the wider community. At another meeting of the Children's Parliament in Village K I am told about the water pump that they had helped to get installed in their village after petitioning the local Panchayat (local government institution). By promoting participatory democracy SAM are helping young Dalits to express voices and articulate concerns that are all too often stifled in more formal learning environments and this is a crucial element of fighting the value system that seeks to separate the pure from the impure.

## **Closing Thoughts**

In this chapter I have discussed barriers to Dalit participation in learning at both the macro and micro level. I argue that the Indian education policy context, in addition to the experiences of Dalit children in schools and communities, does little to challenge a value system based upon the hierarchical division of society into the pure, the less pure and the not pure. The fragmentation and separation that occurs on the basis of this value system means that a disproportionate number of Dalit children are out of school. The only way to challenge this injustice is therefore to encourage Dalit children to critically reflect upon the circumstances of their oppression and act on the basis of this transformed consciousness. This is the motivation behind all of Social Action Movement's educational initiatives – learning is not just about teaching Dalit children to read and write or pass exams, rather it is about seeking to affect a fundamental shift in the Dalit self-world view.

## **Chapter Eight: Concluding Thoughts (Opened)**

### **Part One: Discussing the Themes**

In this thesis I have tried to develop a conceptual framework for thinking about Dalit emancipation and participation (in learning as well as wider society) by exploring ideas relating to the potential role that self-reflection can play in the transformation of consciousness. In a sense one of the fundamental features of human consciousness is that it is constantly changing. Moods swing, we experience pleasure and pain, indifference and anger, we take substances (for medicinal and recreational purposes) that alter our consciousness and, most nights, we undergo radical shifts in consciousness when we fall asleep and dream. All of these are more or less transient and impermanent aspects of our dynamic consciousness. Throughout history, however, there have been those who believe that it is possible to affect a deeper transformation of consciousness, a more lasting change in our mode of self-awareness that has profound implications for how we view ourselves and others (our self-world view). I have drawn on the works of a number of such thinkers. Indeed this thesis is premised upon the assumption that seeking to extend our understanding of the processes involved in such transformations can help us to think more deeply about Dalit emancipation and participation.

Some might find the arguments that I have put forward interesting, others will find them less persuasive. For me, however, the crucial question that must be clearly stated is – do the ideas contained in this thesis have any relevance to real Dalit lives? Is there anything in this thesis that might be of benefit to the people and organisations that are committed to abolishing caste based discrimination and its most pernicious



manifestation – the practice of Untouchability? In this chapter I will make a case for why I believe that I can answer yes to both questions.

Organisations like Social Action Movement and Dalit thinkers and activists like Dr Ambedkar have placed the transformation of Dalit consciousness at the heart of the emancipatory struggle. For a Dalit to be truly liberated there must be a radical shift in their state of consciousness and mode of thinking. A Dalit must see, to use Freirean language, that they are beings from themselves and not beings for another. However, I firmly believe that Dalit emancipation cannot exclusively be conceived in terms of the transformative action brought about by a shift in Dalit consciousness (praxis). Whilst it is crucial to encourage Dalits to recognise the circumstances of their oppression by liberating themselves from a self-world view based upon caste obligation, as Ambedkar well knew, it is also profoundly important to help those people who are not designated ‘Untouchable’ to see the poverty of caste-based thought and practice. To do this the dialogue has to be widened beyond Dalit communities and activists. Not only caste Hindus or Christians and Muslims who observe Untouchability, but also others, from different countries and cultures who might have something useful to contribute, must join the debate.

I have written the thesis in the way that I have because I believe that ‘Untouchability’ is not exclusively a Dalit problem (although it will be most acutely experienced by Dalits themselves), it is not even simply a problem for the South Asian sub-continent where caste is most commonly practised. I am convinced that ‘Untouchability’ is a human problem because it is a particularly insidious example of a certain way of thinking about ourselves in relation to others. This way of thinking relates to a self-world view based upon separation, fragmentation and isolation. As Buber might say,

when one says 'I' in this mode of consciousness it is the primary word combination I-It. The vantage point is the Cartesian ego which serves as the cardinal point of reference - a self-awareness that imprisons and alienates because it assumes that it is the locus of truth. Thomas Merton (1968) argues that modern human beings are very much dominated by, what he refers to as this 'Cartesian consciousness' whereby one estimates one's own self as absolutely primary:

"Modern consciousness then tends to create this solipsistic bubble of awareness – an ego-self imprisoned in its own consciousness, isolated and out of touch with other selves in so far as they are all 'things' rather than persons"

(p. 22)

In Chapter Six I note that a significant battle for the Dalit emancipation movement is the humanisation of Dalits who have been portrayed (in literature or the media for example) as 'thing like' (objectified) rather than persons with emotions and a legitimate right to self-determination. One of the crucial elements of the caste system, as Dumont and others have argued, is that it is premised upon the opposition of, and attempt to keep separate, the pure from the impure. Pollution is the result of failing to do so. The Dalit is inferior to, and therefore should be separated from, the Brahmin, because a Dalit is less pure and can pollute with their very touch. It is in this sense that I believe caste consciousness exemplifies what Bohm (originally published 1980) refers to as a 'fragmentary self-world view' (2002, p. 3) – a mode of consciousness that is essentially divisive and narrow. Many of the thinkers that I have used in this thesis would argue that escaping this fragmentary self-world view and recognising that, ontologically speaking, Being is relational (I-Thou) has been a perennial human concern and one that transcends time and culture. Indeed, some have even interpreted Adam and Eve's original fall from grace after eating from the tree of knowledge, as a

metaphor to explain the separation and isolation (from original unity in the Garden of Eden) that results from privileging ego-self and affecting an artificial split (eating the forbidden fruit) between subject and object. The (I-It) ‘knowledge’ that the subject has of the object domain is only possible because of separation – however it is, to use Bohm’s term, an abstraction and relative to our individual perspective. A different kind of (I-Thou) knowledge arises from awareness of relational being when the fragmentary self-world view (the artificial separation between subject and object) has been abandoned. To return to ‘undivided wholeness’, whether conceptualised as ‘life in paradise before the fall’ or Nirvana, has always been the goal of the spiritual quest – and, as such, it is not achieved without undergoing a radical transformation in consciousness. This is starkly expressed in the following statement from the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Andalusian Sufi Ibn Arabi when he states:

“...if you truly look and seek the reality, you will see that everything is really interconnected and one” (2005, p. 106)

Teilhard de Chardin (1974), writing half a millennium later, and from a different religious tradition notes something very similar:

“...what life ultimately calls upon us to do in order that we may be is to incorporate ourselves into and subordinate ourselves to an organic totality of which, cosmically speaking, we are no more than conscious particles.” (In King, 1999, p. 151)

One obvious objection to the argument that I have put forward so far is that one does not have to delve very deeply into the philosophies associated with Hindu religion (the religion most obviously connected to caste-consciousness) to discover similar ontological positions. From the Vedic hymns, where the notion of Varna is first

recorded, to the more introspective and less ritualistic Upanishads we can discover a similar determination to transcend the fragmented self-world viewpoint. In the ‘Song of Creation’ Chapter 10 V 129 of the Rig Veda we find the transcendental idea of unity (or one):

“There was neither death nor immortality then. No signs were there of night or day. The ONE was breathing by its own power, in deep peace. Only the ONE was: there was nothing beyond” (Mascaro, 1962, p. xiii)

In Easwaran’s translation of the Katha Upanishad the importance of returning to this primordial unity is clearly communicated:

“9 [s]he is formless, and can never be seen  
With these two eyes. But [s]he reveals herself  
In the heart made pure through meditation  
And sense restraint. Realising [her] one is released  
From the cycle of birth and death.

10 When the five senses are stilled, when the mind  
Is stilled, when the intellect is stilled,  
That is called the highest state by the wise.  
They say yoga is this complete stillness  
In which one enters this unitive state,

Never to become separate again.

If one is not established in this state

The sense of unity will come and go.” (1996, p. 96)

In so far as the systematisation of caste has instituted separation based upon purity (imposing separate housing or vocations and ritual duties for the pure and the impure) I believe that one can legitimately argue that the I-It consciousness which this speaks of is a violation of the spirit of those ancient texts which had at their core an affirmation of I-Thou consciousness. A Hindu thinker like Sri Aurobindo would, I feel, be able to sympathise with such sentiments, one like Manu would certainly not. Discussing his notion of unity which he refers to as cosmic consciousness Aurobindo (originally published 1917) writes:

“It is evident that by dwelling in this cosmic consciousness our whole experience and valuation of everything in the universe will be radically changed. As individual egos we dwell in the Ignorance and judge everything by a broken, partial and personal standard of knowledge; we experience everything according to the capacity of a limited consciousness and force and are therefore unable to give a divine response or set the true value upon any part of cosmic experience. [...] We live by fragments of experience and judge by our fragmentary values each thing and the whole [...] we then make believe that our fractions are integers and try to thrust our one-sided view-points into the catholicity of the all-vision of the divine.”

(1999, p. 303)

On this account one would not be able to separate purity and impurity as rigidly as orthodox caste based practices seek to do – separation of this kind would be tantamount to the ‘broken, partial and personal standard of knowledge’ that Aurobindo refers to. Indeed nothing could be conceptualised as ‘pure’ in so far as it deviated from this original unity – impurity would be a natural concomitant of the fragmented self-world view.

In this thesis, however, I have argued that it is important to dispense with contrasting notions of purity and impurity and the desire to keep them separate. If we do not it can give rise to all sorts of offensive doctrines of which caste and racial supremacy are significant examples. And it is for precisely this reason that it becomes crucial to understand the role that self-reflective inquiry can play in the evolution of consciousness moving away from the fragmentary self-world view towards one that is orientated towards communion and participation. For this reason I have tried to make sense of 'participation' in terms of the progressive development of I-Thou consciousness. I believe that deepening our understanding of these processes might help us to challenge not only caste-based thinking but also other forms of prejudice based upon distinguishing the pure from the impure, the Us from the Them.

I have tried to develop this dominant theme throughout my thesis and in a number of different ways. In Chapter Two it is very much from an ontological and epistemological perspective. In outlining my own methodological position I felt that it was crucial to challenge the Cartesian consciousness for very much the same reasons that Merton does above – because it alienates one from the world in which one is embedded. The autobiographical nature of Chapter Four and the ongoing self-reflective inquiry which became a focal part of this thesis should be understood in this context. I wanted not only to explore research theme one and try to understand the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry but also to acknowledge the profound importance of a reflexive approach to research. I find it difficult to conceptualise a research situation (particularly when one is researching other human beings) whereby one could adopt a purely positivistic stance and separate the subject (researcher) so comprehensively from the object (researched).

Whilst the non-dualism that lies at the heart of many of the philosophical and spiritual positions that have emerged from India including Vedanta and Buddhism represents an important anti-dote to the alienating Cartesian consciousness I think that it is important to recognise an ontological position that does not simply ignore our experience of separation. That is to say, whilst the goal might be to arrive at an I-Thou consciousness and transcend the fragmentary self-world view an awareness of how dualism and non-dualism are linked is vital. Buber, in contrasting I-It with I-Thou and Bohm in distinguishing between the implicate and the explicate order both achieve this. It is vital because one cannot communicate the importance of I-Thou consciousness or the implicate order in any way other than viewing it as a liberation or escape from a highly restricted (or incomplete) way of perceiving the world which can be detrimental to human well being because it does not sufficiently enable us to comprehend the ramifications of our thoughts and action. Separating the subject from the object domain so violently prevents wisdom precisely because a higher order consciousness is obfuscated. One of the most influential authorities on Zen Buddhism, D. T. Suzuki in an essay entitled *Enlightenment and Ignorance* (1949) asks:

“What is this Prajna [the Sanskrit word for wisdom]? It is the understanding of a higher order than that which is habitually exercised in acquiring relative knowledge. It is a faculty both intellectual and spiritual, through the operation of which the soul is enabled to break the fetters of intellection. The latter is always dualistic in as much as it is cognizant of subject and object, but in the Prajna which is exercised in ‘unison with one-thought-viewing’ there is no separation between knower and known, these are all viewed in one thought, and enlightenment is the outcome of this [...] for when the mind reverses its usual course of working and, instead of dividing itself externally, goes back to

its original inner abode of oneness, it begins to realise the state of ‘one-thought-viewing’ where Ignorance ceases to scheme...”

(1994, p. 124-5)

In this thesis I have tried to develop these epistemological and ontological perspectives with a view to understanding Dalit emancipation. In a sense the ‘escape’, ‘liberation’ or ‘enlightenment’ which is the goal of transforming consciousness in such a way as to highlight the inadequacy of dualistic thinking has served as a model for understanding the liberation from caste-consciousness that is required if Dalit emancipation is to occur. In both instances self-reflection, or the turn inwards, is taken to be a fundamental first step. The Dalit autobiographies and works of Dr Ambedkar that I have read have strengthened my conviction that this is so, so too did the empirical component of this thesis which I return to below.

Looking back on Chapter Four I recognise that it was instrumental in helping me to explore the transformative potential of self-reflective inquiry precisely because I was able to perceive more clearly my own fragmentary self-world view. This came sharply into focus when I began to conceive of my PhD as a journey between England and India which could help me to make sense of my dual heritage or divided self. The identity confusion that I experienced as a person of mixed-heritage and a visible ethnic minority in a majority White-English Suffolk market town led me to believe that I should seek a more stable sense of self. Chapter Four therefore could be seen as a quest for (internal) coherence in the face of fragmented being. In an essay entitled *The Art of Perceiving Movement* (originally published 1996) Bohm provides a clue as to why I might have been disturbed by this uncertainty and why it could have something to do with the inadequacy of a fragmentary mode of thought:



“The word ‘identity’ comes from the roots ‘id’ and ‘entity,’ which shows its meaning: ‘the same being’. Thus one may think that, in *essence*, each thing remains ‘always the same as it was.’ This notion is especially common with regard to the ‘self,’ which is generally supposed to have a permanent identity. Indeed, so strong is the belief in this identity that when people feel that they are losing it or do not know what it is they may experience a sense of profound disturbance, which has been described in literature as a need to search for ‘one’s lost identity’.”

(In Bohm, 2004, p. 122)

As long as my search for internal coherence originated from the Cartesian ego it was foredoomed to failure because this ego is a relative and impermanent aspect of my being. The very fact that my encounters with ‘significant others’ (from the abusive lad in Great Yarmouth to the shoe-shop owner in Mumbai or the airport official in Edinburgh) have helped me reflect more deeply on my sense of self suggests that ego-selfhood is not only fluid but also significantly shaped by relationship to others. Ibn Arabi notes:

“...the vision that a being has of herself in herself is not the same as that which another reality procures for her, and which she uses for herself as a mirror: in this she manifests herself to her self in the form which results from the ‘place’ of the vision; this would not exist without the ‘plane of reflection’ and the ray which is reflected therein”

(1975, p. 8-9)

Applying such insights to my reflections on Dalit emancipation and participation helped in two ways. Firstly, if Dalit liberation depends on the re-interpretation of Dalit self-hood and identity (the transformation of consciousness) then it is crucial to demonstrate that the self-world view is sufficiently fluid to permit radical

transformation. A significant problem facing the Dalit liberation movement is that many Hindus and Dalits believe that Varna (and therefore one's caste identity/consciousness) arises out of an immutable cosmic order. Pinned down by karma and dharma it cannot be transgressed. What I have attempted to do in this thesis is to argue that the notion of a fixed and immutable ego-self is fallacious – I have used ideas that are central to many spiritual perspectives (including some philosophies that have emerged from India) in an attempt to make this point. I have also tried to illustrate it using my own autobiographical reflections.

Secondly, by reflecting on my own shifting sense of self and exploring the extent to which relationship with others affected not only how I saw myself, but also the extent to which I felt a sense of belonging, I was able to make links with the notion of participation. Recognising the limitations of a fragmentary self-world view enables one to reassess ideas about inter-subjectivity and this has obvious implications for thinking about participation in learning communities and beyond. My simplistic and fragmentary stance (I do not want a part in the Hindu/Muslim tensions that have plagued sub-continental politics) may have arisen from a desire to avoid the I-It consciousness of sectarian animosity but the naivety with which I happily confided my family history to the shoe shop owner in Mumbai who was perhaps less willing or able to stand aside from the conflict was an example of failing to engage in I-Thou consciousness (on both our parts). I engaged in the meeting from my own perspective, he from his and the channels of communication were shut down. I-Thou consciousness and an appreciation of our place in the 'organic whole' is necessary if we wish to deepen our understanding of participation and relationship. If schools and their communities are thought about in more 'organic' rather than 'mechanistic' ways perhaps barriers to participation in learning will be considered in a more robust way. I

return to this point below but here I wish simply to note that seeing Dalit participation in learning as an issue of enrolment, retention and achievement ('add Dalit children and stir') could be the legacy of a more restricted way of viewing the world. It is a particularly 'mechanistic' (I-It) approach to educational improvement that obfuscates the many and varied reasons why children are treated unequally, are out of school and/or under perform. A more 'organic' (I-Thou) approach which acknowledges complexity and the interaction between a host of connected issues will deepen our understanding of participation. Most importantly enabling society at large to recognise the poverty of fragmentary caste-based thinking is a crucial part of this more organic approach to participation.

In Chapter Five I tried to tell a story about the emergence and institutionalisation of caste consciousness. In the Introduction I noted that the word 'caste' is of Spanish-Portuguese origin meaning 'not mixed' and derives from the Latin word *castus* meaning chaste. Chapter Five, therefore, was an attempt to understand how, ideologically, historically and culturally speaking, the quality of 'not being mixed' came to be so influential in Indian society. In this thesis I have argued that the importance that is attached to 'not being mixed' (purity) is deeply troubling when it gives rise to notions of caste and racial superiority. I believe that if we are to critique such thinking we have to recognise that it is a legacy of a limited and fragmentary way of viewing the world – this is why the chapter really represents an attempt to understand the shaping, systematisation and evolution of caste consciousness. This move was crucial for exploring how self-reflective inquiry can transform caste consciousness and therefore facilitate Dalit emancipation.

In Chapters Six and Seven I developed my argument through the empirical evidence I gathered during my fieldwork with Social Action Movement. This helped me to explore the significance that a Dalit led NGO seeking to abolish caste oppression attached to instilling a critical consciousness in Dalits. I tried to use the data to understand how Social Action Movement encouraged Dalits to embark upon the inward journey (self-reflection) that was required to expose the social, political and economic contradictions of exploitative caste relations. Given that research theme three related to Dalit participation in learning it was important for me to appreciate the links between the self-reflective inquiry deemed necessary for Dalit emancipation and the educational projects that could potentially facilitate this liberated consciousness.

In terms of the general thrust of the argument that I am making in this chapter I think there is a significant contradiction that needs elucidating here. For SAM Dalit liberation involves a transformation of consciousness followed up by decisive action that opposes the oppressive ‘reality’ that Dalits face (this praxis serves as the basis for self-determination). Chapter Six introduces the theme of Dalit empowerment through a process referred to by SAM as ‘conscientizing the marginalised’ and recognises it as a central component of the organisation’s *Modus Operandi*. It then takes a more detailed look at the tools and techniques that are employed to stimulate this transformation of consciousness. Throughout this chapter there is a strong sense that Dalit freedom is to be won through conflict and struggle – through separation from a hegemonic order that is highly caste conscious. SAM’s clarion call ‘Dalits are not Hindus’, adumbrated by Ambedkar’s statement ‘I was born a Hindu I will not die one’, epitomises the fragmentary mode of thought which, I am arguing, lies at the heart of caste consciousness. This picture is confirmed when we consider the language, symbols and ideas that are used to re-interpret Dalit identity. Claims to

purity are made – Dalits are portrayed as the ‘original inhabitants of the land’ – conquered by a ‘contaminating’ foreign invader. Dalits are humanised at the expense of demonised others (caste Hindus more generally and Brahmins specifically). In a bid to inculcate what Aloysius (1998) construes as a newly meaningful symbol system a fragmentary and oppositional logic is used very powerfully to distinguish a pure *Us* from an impure *Them*.

I have never been doused in acid for fishing in a pond that belonged to caste Hindus (See article by O’Neil in National Geographic Magazine June 2003) nor have I ever had family members murdered for having the audacity to enter local politics. I have not even been refused a drink because some one did not want to touch me. The minor racism that I faced growing up in an extremely wealthy part of the planet in very comfortable surroundings will not enable me to sufficiently empathise with those who have been marginalised as a result of birth into a Dalit community and so I will not argue that SAM are *wrong* for adopting the methods that they do for challenging caste oppression.

The point that I wish to make is that I believe that SAM’s praxis (self-reflection that leads to transformative action) does not go far enough. The freedom that they seek to secure for Dalits should be seen as part of an ongoing quest to transform human consciousness - a necessary point in the development of a consciousness that can and should be deepened and widened. Martin Buber (originally published 1926) makes this point very clearly when he states:

“There is a tendency to understand this freedom, which may be termed evolutionary freedom, as at the opposite pole from compulsion. But at the opposite pole from compulsion there stands not freedom but communion.

Compulsion is a negative reality; communion is the positive reality; freedom is a possibility, possibility regained. At the opposite pole of being compelled by destiny or nature or [human beings] there does not stand being free of destiny or nature or [human beings] but to commune and to covenant with them. To do this, it is true that one must first have become independent; but this independence is a foot-bridge, not a dwelling place. Freedom is the vibrating needle, the fruitful zero.” (2002 p. 107-8)

If Buber’s thoughts here are not considered carefully I believe that, in the struggle for freedom, there is a real danger of exchanging old ideas about separation and purity for new ones. Hindutva bears testimony to how damaging this can be. As I have been arguing in this chapter, the self-reflection that transforms consciousness and facilitates an awareness of oppression (and therefore inculcates the desire for self-determination so that one is no longer a being-for-another but a being-for-oneself) can be extended. Further self-reflection is required to stimulate an I-Thou consciousness and an awareness of communion, participation or relational being. This is why I have argued that the debate needs to be widened. It is crucial that all communities (Hindus and non-Hindus) understand why caste-based thinking is fundamentally de-humanising and by thinking about alternative modes of thought that transcend the fragmentary self-world view I believe we open up an opportunity for such reflection. In keeping with the Freirean model it is then imperative that we take transformative action based upon the evolution of our consciousness and this, I believe, could stimulate a more thorough approach to Dalit participation in learning and society.

This is the philosophy that underpins Chapter Seven. I believe that it is possible to think about many of the barriers to Dalit participation in learning as the result of a

fragmentary self-world view. As Chapter Five reveals the caste-mind set enshrined in the laws of Manu was clearly instrumental in the historical exclusion of Dalits from education. I argue in Chapter Seven that it might be plausible to regard the increasingly impoverished government schools (fast becoming learning ghettos catering predominantly for Dalit children) as the product of a modern variant of separating the pure from the impure. The pure can choose to educate their children privately (away from the polluting presence of Dalit children). The impure, where they receive an education at all, must be kept separate.

In a profound sense exclusion and barriers to participation in learning are the legacy of a fragmentary mode of thought, a deep-seated failure to acknowledge and adequately respond to shared being. Buildings that are inaccessible to wheel chair users are developed by people who fail to think sufficiently carefully about what life might be like for someone who has restricted mobility. Anger and hostility at rising levels of immigration occur when one is unable to think about how one might respond if one's own country was blighted by war or economic deprivation. Throwing an aggressive child out of a classroom is far easier than attempting to arrive at a clearer understanding of what is causing that aggression. Repeating, mantra like, that poverty is to blame for low quality education rather than seriously reflecting on what one might do as a teacher (or as a whole school) to improve learning situations for Dalit children is tantamount to turning one's back on shared being. At the heart of all of these barriers to participation (for the student who uses a wheel chair, the child of a migrant worker, the pupil identified as having a behavioural disorder or the young Dalit) lies the breakdown of I-Thou consciousness.

The breakdown of I-Thou consciousness occurs where self-interested behaviour and egocentric perception prevails. The more entrenched self-interested thought and action is the more numerous the barriers to participation will be. In this sense I feel that it is important to guard against the excessive and arbitrary division between subject and object. However, there are gradations of this fragmented self-world view which are important to note here. The school planner who does not have enough forethought to build a ramp for wheel chair users cannot be equated with the higher caste Hindu who douses the Dalit in acid because they have fished in a pond that was off limits. And yet both are acting according to a mode of thought that is on a continuum. The more deep-seated the fragmentation between human beings, the greater the chance of 'in-human' behaviour; the more objectified and thing-like other people are perceived to be, the less meaningful participation will be. For these reasons it is necessary to link our understanding of barriers to participation in learning with the self-reflective inquiry that leads to liberation from dualistic consciousness.

Other barriers to participation that I highlight in Chapter Seven very obviously result from division, separation and fragmentation. For example, the physical distances that Dalit children have to travel to the nearest school and the social divide manifest between higher caste teachers and lower caste pupils which indubitably contributes to the significant levels of corruption and exploitation that the children are all too aware of. Interestingly the PROBE report (1999) critiques the type of knowledge that the school system imparts along very similar lines:

“The school system [...] treats knowledge as disjointed fragments of information, e.g. teaching ‘Parts and properties of plants’ in class 2, ‘The function of leaves and photosynthesis’ in class 3, ‘The seed-flower-fruit cycle’ in class 5, etc. By contrast, the natural learning process in children is far from



linear, and the way they process information about the world they live in is far more holistic and integrated.” (p. 77)

This is very reminiscent of what Freire has to say about knowledge transmission and the contrast he makes between the banking model and problem posing education. When the knower is separated from the known the ‘knowledge gap’ is to be filled by the hypodermic injection of facts and figures into the mind which is construed as an empty vessel (banking model). Problem posing education on the other hand cannot take place without a deeper recognition that knowledge is relative to the knower and therefore requires the learner to critically engage with, and bring creative insight to, what is being learnt. In the extract above the PROBE report refers to this as a ‘holistic and integrated’ approach to the processing of information. The lesson on solar energy that I observed at the Teddy School managed to take exactly this kind of approach by getting the children to burn holes in paper with a magnifying glass before teaching them about the motion of the planets in our solar system as they orbit the sun.

David Bohm (originally published 1996) argues that this ‘creativity’ is essential not only for scientific endeavour but also any type of perception that is to give rise to original thought and new insight. The rote memorisation and mechanical learning bequeathed to the Indian education system by the colonial administration is incapable of giving rise to creativity because it is based on the repetitious accumulation of knowledge. Creativity, according to Bohm, requires a different kind of relationship between the knower and the known – one which narrows the gap between subject and object because the knower suspends their pre-conceptions by recognising that these are contingent. The knower:

“...must be able to learn something new, even if this means that the ideas and notions that are comfortable or dear to [them] may be overturned.”

(2004, p. 4)

This does not need to be of the same magnitude as the creative insight that was required for Einstein to overturn Newtonian mechanism, I witnessed it when I saw the expressions of joy and wonder on the children's faces as their paper began to smoulder and flame. This, essentially, is active participation in learning and it is an approach that SAM have utilised for their most ambitious educational project, the Children's Parliament. Here critical reflection that leads to creative insight is imperative to liberate Dalit children from the shackles of an oppressive caste consciousness. Traditional ideas and notions that have emerged as a result of centuries old social norms and conventions (such as hereditary occupation or temple prohibition) must be overturned before any kind of creative insight can be generated. SAM have identified this questioning of the Hindu hegemony as the corner stone of Dalit participation in learning. The uninspiring curriculum coupled with the routine disciplining of children in government schools serves only to perpetuate inequality precisely because it fails to generate minds that can perceive the inherent contradictions of caste based inequality.

## **Part Two: Problems with the Thesis and Ideas for Future Work**

In this chapter I have discussed the various themes in this thesis in relation to one dominant idea viz. that opportunities for participation are extended and deepened once the fragmentary self-world view has been transcended. The less forcefully dualistic

thought governs our actions the more able we are to enter into communion with others. In this section of the chapter I wish to use this framework as a basis for criticising my thesis. I shall argue that many of the problems with my research stem from either a failure or inability to escape fragmentation.

### ***Barriers to I-Thou relationship and my research***

One of the major problems with time-limited fieldwork is that there is only a small window of opportunity to build relationships with those amongst whom one is conducting one's research. This difficulty is exacerbated where there are significant cultural, experiential and linguistic differences to contend with. Through my fieldwork I was able to develop a few close relationships that became friendships. With other key informants I had a number of exchanges which I found enormously helpful but did not yield particularly deep relationships. Other interactions in the field were little more than fleeting encounters (although they often stimulated useful reflection).

A number of factors affect how deep a relationship is or can be. The amount of time one spends, or the types of activities in which one engages, with another has enormous bearing on the extent to which an I-Thou relationship can develop. Living, eating, working and enjoying leisure time with my translator enabled us to enjoy a fairly close relationship. The semi-structured in-depth interviews that I conducted with key informants in SAM yielded a different kind of relationship to that afforded by asking single questions to school children or parents in villages. Of course the ethnographic approach is one way in which the researcher can attempt to deepen the relationships that are developed in the field but it is not without difficulties and my empirical work was, strictly speaking, not ethnography.

One of the biggest problems has been the extent to which I have been separated from the people and communities that my research is most interested in – the Dalits at village level. Perhaps the single most important barrier here has been a linguistic one. I do not speak Tamil and English is not widely spoken in the villages. Communication was therefore mediated (I required a translator) and as such it is harder (although not impossible) to transcend the subject-object divide. Indeed language as a form of symbolic communication has the potential to either fragment or unite. A language can bind a community or nation, it enables those who share it to engage in dialogue – to critique beliefs and ideas, explore shared meanings and differences of opinion. In short it is a powerful tool for transcending ego-consciousness because it enables the isolated human unit to reach beyond themselves. Other extra-linguistic forms of communication are also powerful (a glance or a glare, a nudge, a wink or hug for example) but language adds a new dimension in the evolution of consciousness, not least because it can be written down and dispersed across time and space.

However language can also divide – if, like me, you don't speak the same one as the people you are most interested in communicating with. Speaking to one parent in a village I was humbled when she apologised for her 'illiteracy' because she did not speak English. I responded that she has been very helpful and besides that I was illiterate in Tamil but I realised that her 'illiteracy' might have played a large part in her poverty, mine simply inconvenienced me in a study that was ultimately a luxury. Even within shared languages there are possibilities for fragmentation such as regional dialects or status markers. For example my translator was very conscious of the Sanskritised version of Tamil which she spoke and that gave away her caste

positioning to those people we were talking to (another potential barrier to developing I-Thou relationship).

I do not doubt that the empirical component of my research would have been more meaningful had I been able to engage in un-mediated dialogue whilst visiting the schools and villages. However deepening relationship is not just a facet of shared language – it also has to do with the sharing of experience. A Brahmin may speak the same language as, and share aspects of their culture with, a Dalit but their different life experiences and chances might still prevent I-Thou relationship. Eating with my hands, beginning to feel more comfortable in Tamil Nadu – these all hinted at the possibility of deepening participation but essentially there was too much that separated me from the communities within which I was conducting my research for the empirical work to represent much more than ‘an initial engagement’.

### ***Failure to explore how the SAM message was received***

As a result of the linguistic barrier – the bulk of my empirical evidence (which forms the basis of the case study) is derived from talking to key informants in SAM who spoke English and reading SAM publications written in English. As such I have been able to explore how certain decision makers in the organisation (those that have had access to English medium education) think about Dalit emancipation and the central importance that they accord to self-reflective inquiry and the transformation of consciousness. What I have not been able to do is explore particularly deeply how these ideas have been received, interpreted and acted upon by those who they seek to liberate (the Dalits in the schools and communities that I had only limited contact with). I think that this is a crucial weakness of my research and one which arises from an inability to overcome fragmentation.

If I was to extend this research I would want to spend more time in the schools and communities exploring how successful SAM's attempts to instil a critical consciousness have been. During my fieldwork I spent varying amounts of times in schools (from very cursory visits of no more than one or two hours to slightly more substantial three day visits). These provided some useful insights into government, private and welfare schooling in India but I did not spend long enough in any one school to generate a very deep understanding of relationships (teacher-pupil, pupil-pupil) within schools and between schools and communities. The evidence I collected was mostly anecdotal and perhaps significantly conditioned by the kind of reading that I had done about Indian education (for example the use that I made of The Probe Report (1999)). I think that one can view this as the kind of fragmentation that Bohm is talking about – the opportunity for creative insight into what was going on in the schools and communities that I visited was limited because of the significant barriers to my own participation in these environments. This was made abundantly clear to me when I was observing in classrooms – I was an outsider looking (but not being able to listen) in.

In retrospect I should have followed some of the children who were involved in the Children's Parliament into their government school classrooms and tried to explore the impact that such extra-curricular tuition from SAM was having on the way that they viewed their life-worlds and the way that they interacted with their peers and teachers. Language would have been a difficulty but if I had followed a small group of Dalit children over time I might have been able to deepen my understanding of the way that the SAM message was being received, interpreted and acted upon. As such

my encounters with learning environments in India that sought to facilitate Dalit participation in learning were perhaps not as meaningful as they could have been.

### **Closing Thoughts...**

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges that this thesis faces is to survive the charge of utopianism. Even if (and it is a big if) there could be consensus regarding the central tenet that liberation from a fragmented self-world view is desirable (or even crucial) it is altogether another matter to achieve it. In the face of numerous threats to global security, greed, poverty and caste hatred (or even ambivalence and indifference) it might seem that the separation engendered by self-interested thought is a perennial feature of human existence. The I-Thou consciousness necessary to transcend it might appear to be little more than wishful thinking – a nice idea but wholly impractical for the pragmatists amongst us. It is, however, my firm conviction that our lives provide us with many opportunities to recognise shared being and develop I-Thou consciousness – even if it is very difficult to sustain this mode of awareness for extended periods of time. Thinkers through time and across cultures have alluded to the fact that the gate is indeed narrow, the road arduous and our vision frequently veiled but all would agree that the journey is never-the-less imperative if human consciousness is to evolve beyond the limits that have been imposed by the fragmentary self-world view.

In the last year and a half of my PhD I was working for Norwich and Norfolk Racial Equality Council. The organisation exists, not only to challenge racism, but also to enhance cohesion between diverse ethnic communities in Norfolk where the demographic profile, although changing, remains predominantly white-English. Employment with NNREC has enabled me to re-visit some of the experiences that I

recounted in Chapter Four and view them in a richer contextual framework thereby deepening my understanding of certain themes that I have developed in this thesis.

One particularly illuminating episode occurred after a meeting that was being held in our office to explore the disproportionate representation of visible ethnic minorities in police stop and search statistics. It was part of a thematic review being conducted in partnership with Norfolk Constabulary and the Police Authority. Having been stopped and asked to account for myself by the police on more than one occasion it is a subject that I have some personal experience of. As office administrator I was introduced to the representatives from the police who I had not met before – one of whom was a man called Simon Offord. Upon hearing his name I informed him that Offord was my mother's maiden name and we joked that we could be long lost relatives. He told me that his father had an interest in genealogy and had traced his family from Kent back to Suffolk. When I recounted the episode to my mother and grandmother I was interested to learn that my grandfather's side of the family could also be traced back to Suffolk and, co-incidentally, included a number of police officers. Since I do not believe in the notion of hereditary occupation I felt that I was not pre-destined to follow my forebears into law enforcement, however I was keen to email Simon with my findings. He responded with interest and said that actually his decision to enter the police force was perceived as a break from family tradition (which, although mostly artisans, had also included a thief!). He told me that he would pass the information on to his father who he expected would find it interesting. The next time that Simon came to the office for a meeting I looked a little more carefully at his face. It might just have been an overactive imagination but I was sure that I saw features that reminded me of my maternal uncle.



Perhaps it is not so important whether Simon and I can prove consanguinity – what is most interesting is the challenge that this story presents to notions such as purity, separation, belonging and roots – all of which have been used to entrench the fragmented self-world view. If chance encounters lead us to question the extent to which we hold ourselves to be separate from others, sustained self-reflective inquiry might yield even deeper insights into our shared being. To quote Ibn Arabi:

“O you who seek the path leading to the secret

Turn back, for it is in you that the entire secret is found.” (p. 43)

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